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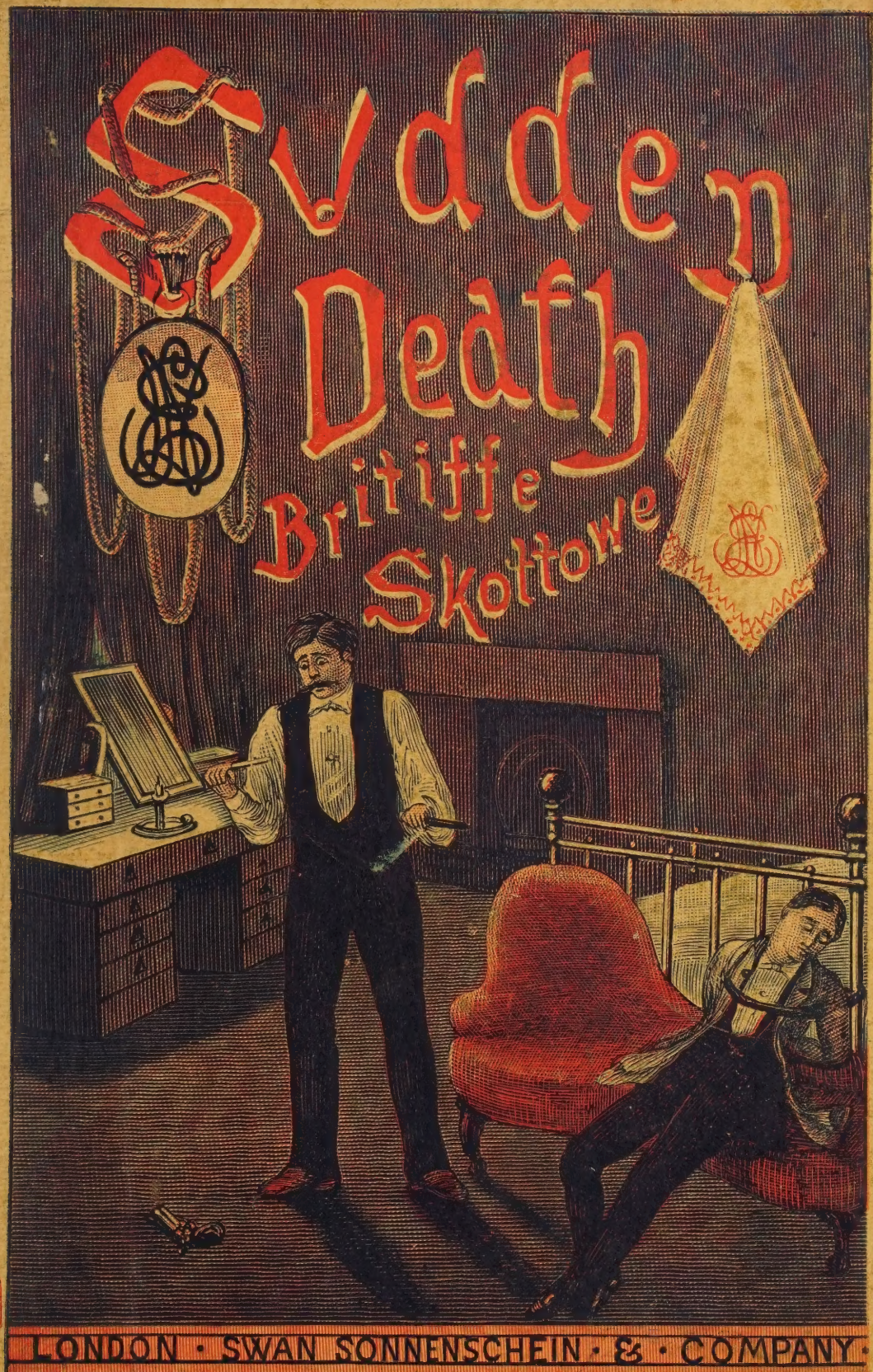

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Bridffe Skottowe is in all probability an assumed name. He is not mentioned elsewhere. The novel is sensational.

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SUDDEN DEATH;

OR,

My Lady the Wolf.

BY

BRITIFFE SKOTTOWE.

London:
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SUDDEN DEATH.

PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

THE MURDER ON THE CLIFFS.

"ARE you asleep, Buchanan?" inquired Archer, suddenly sitting up and brushing the grass from his coat.

But Buchanan didn't answer. To tell the truth I—for I am Buchanan—was far too comfortable to have any desire to move, and I hoped that Archer would think I was really asleep and leave me to bask in silence.

I might have known better, however.

"Are you asleep, Buchanan?" repeated Archer in a louder key at the same time very rudely and childishly throwing a handful of dry grass over my face. "Why don't you answer a fellow?"

"I wish to goodness *you* were," I replied irritably for I hated being disturbed.

"Well, you do look pretty comfortable," he continued, yawning.

"I should be if I didn't feel quite so like a baked potato."

"Yaw—w—m! yes, it is hot," assented Archer at the end of another prodigious yawn. "Well, I suppose we ought to be moving, don't you know."

To this suggestion I made no reply.

"Come, old chap," continued my tormentor, "I'm off. You had better come too."

"Shan't," sleepily.

"Politeness always was your *forte*. Come, it is half-past four. We shall be just in time for tea."

"Dash tea!"

"Think what Lady Laura will say when she finds her cavalier is missing."

"Don't care!"

"Nay, but this is rank blasphemy. Just imagine if the Beauty heard you utter that highly disrespectful and mutinous remark!"

"Why don't you go if you want to?" I cried thoroughly exasperated and turning round to meet his face very angrily and impressively. Somehow the sight of that smiling, good-humoured face made all my irritation vanish precipitately, and with a lazy laugh I rolled over resting my chin on my hands so that I could look at him sideways without having to crane my neck almost to dislocation. "Have you made out that yacht you came up to look at?" I inquired sternly.

"No," he replied mournfully.

"Why not, when you specially came up to do so and loaded yourself with those precious glasses on purpose?"

"Too much trouble," replied Archer, yawning again, and then much to my relief he threw himself full length on the ground once more. Thankful for small mercies I dismissed him entirely from my thoughts, and took to blinking dreamily at the cliffs opposite without any very clear consciousness of anything except that there *were* cliffs opposite.

Unfortunately, however, I must explain where we were exactly in order that you may understand the events which followed.

Imagine a semicircular cove or creek, deeply indented in the coast-line, and continuing landwards in a valley or coombe, as the natives would call it, which ran in a sloping hollow far away ascending gradually to the distant hills. On either side the cove and coombe were flanked by lofty cliffs, which, though rising quite precipitously from the water's edge and the shining, pebbly beach, sloped more gently inland in a long curve which sank down naturally from one side in a huge ellipse extending upwards with unbroken regularity to the other.

We were perched on the precipitous cliffs on the right side of the cove. At our back the rough downs stretched away on a level for about a quarter of a mile and then dropped down again into a cove and coombe very similar to the one I have described. In front of us, rising rugged and steep from the water, were the cliffs on the opposite side of the cove. Below and between were the shining waters swaying and murmuring over dark forests of sea-

weed and plashing with musical regularity on the white pebbles of the dazzling beach.

Between us and the downs which crowned the summit of the cliffs opposite, the distance was about a quarter of a mile as the crow flies. It was quite easy, therefore, had we been wide awake enough, to see any living creatures which might be moving about over there and to form a very good idea of what they were doing. Had we been inspired, however, by a desire to make our way across, we should be obliged to follow the line of the cliffs we were standing on, inland for some distance until the descent became less precipitous, and then scrambling down the rough slope, hasten across the boulder-strewn bottom of the coombe, struggle breathlessly up amid brambles and blackberry bushes on the other side, and then turn our steps seaward again until we exactly faced the place we had started from. Or instead of descending so soon we might make the journey easier by continuing farther inland on our side until we struck the high road across the coombe—a longer way round, it is true, but a far easier and possibly quicker one in the end.

Therefore, though there was really only a quarter of a mile of distance between us and the cliffs opposite, for practical purposes there was a journey of about two miles round and that by no means an easy or agreeable one.

A panorama of inexpressible loveliness, a scene which would have driven a painter wild with envy, perhaps one of the most beautiful views in that home of the beautiful, South Devon. That was

what we might have been gazing at with rapture had it burst on us for the first time. But we knew it well, Archer and I. We had not come up on the downs with any views with regard to the picturesque, but merely for a walk; and when we actually arrived at the edge of the cliffs where Archer originally intended to make observations seawards, the heat and glare of the August sun, the balmy fragrance of the air, the soothing warmth of the dry grass on which we stretched ourselves, and the exertion of the hot walk, all combined with such a soporific effect that I lay in a sort of semi-doze for Heaven knows how long until Archer so very inopportunely recalled me to animation.

Strange to think how different it might have been had he let me doze on. On what trifles hang the destiny of a life!

After the scenery come the persons, I suppose. Who was Archer? that is the question, is it not? and still more important, what was he like?

Well, he was not exactly an Adonis. I think I should describe him best if I said that he was a good fellow and looked it all over; but that was all. Most people considered him decidedly plain at first; but he shared with Jack Wilkes the lucky characteristic that after the first five minutes no woman ever thought any more about his looks. He was usually known as that "charming Mr. Archer." Even his own sex, who have secretly as great a dislike to men who are exceptionally successful with women as the latter towards a new beauty, liked him as a rule and said he was a "good sort." He was especially popular with boys, chiefly, I think,

because he never laughed at them for precocious assumption of manhood and never treated them contemptuously as children.

He was fair and tall—face considerably tanned by exposure to all sorts of weather; figure drawn on a large scale which betokened and not untruly great muscular strength; most important of all, however, there was a superlative effect about him which it is impossible to describe and which can only be expressed by the word "distinction."

A keen sportsman, who rode straight, shot straight, and talked straight. An enthusiastic traveller, who had gone in search of sport to all sorts of outlandish places. A regular town man, who could doff his country tastes with his country garments and lounge through the Park with as bored an expression on his face as if life to him were a perpetual round of variations of *ennui*. A fellow who one could thoroughly rely on not only from a moral point of view but also because his opinion was usually worth having.

In short, a man to know—and a very useful friend to a young man who wanted to be pushed about in a good-natured way.

That's Charles Archer exactly!

I can't describe myself as I have sketched Archer; you must gather an idea of me as best you can. The little I can tell you is this: my name is Douglas Buchanan, usually known as "Jack,"—Douglas being voted "too much of a mouthful." My father is Sir Douglas Buchanan of Liviotdale, Perthshire, a tall, muscular, red-haired Scotchman with a constitution like that of a horse and an infinite

contempt for everything that is not Scotch. My mother was a beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed Irish girl, and whatever good looks I may happen to possess were certainly transmitted to me through her. Disrespectful as the observation may seem, I must confess that I never gaze upon my "Governor's" face without returning a silent thanksgiving to Providence that I do not take after him in personal appearance. But after all my taste may be bad, for not only did he contrive to inspire the warmest affection in my mother's tender breast, but at the mature age of fifty, ten years after her untimely death, when age had certainly not improved his appearance or his temper, and he was additionally handicapped by an incumbrance,—that is, *me*,—he was once more successful in the lists of Hymen.

I must confess I never had such a high opinion of him after his second marriage as before. It is ignominious to see one's Governor tied to the apron-strings of a tiny, fragile creature who looks as though a breath would blow her away, and to know that she turns him round her little finger with the greatest ease and keeps him at her side like a great dog to fetch and carry for her. It is ignominious I repeat, even though one knows that she is very good to him, and that it is very good *for* him, and that since she came into the family we live in a much more civilized way than we did, and among other things invariably take a house in Town for part of the season. The result, however, is, that I cannot help looking on the Governor with a certain amount of pity for his weakness which naturally

lowers him a trifle in my opinion. She and I get on very well as it happens, for she has no children and the property is entailed; but, somehow, Liviotdale doesn't seem the same to me as in the dear old times that are past and gone for ever; so I seldom go there now. My life is spent in consequence in a very roving fashion, stopping a week here with one friend, a month there with another, anon crossing the Channel and moving about from hotel to hotel through the length and breadth of Europe; but I always go home for the shooting, and as invariably come up to Town when my people are there in order to take advantage of the bedroom which is always at my disposal.

Am I rich? No, not in the modern sense of the term, but extremely comfortably off and thank Heaven entirely independent of my family. I think my step-mother and I get on in consequence far better than we should if she knew that my visits were usually attended by the extraction of cash from her husband's pocket. As it is she is generous and kind and I think really likes me. And I like her as well as I can.

My travels had led me this year at the close of the London season down into Devonshire to stay with the Tottenhams, old friends of mine, who owned a long roomy white house buried in umbrageous trees and surrounded by almost continental scenery at least four or five miles from anything in the shape of a town.

The house was not far from where we were standing, but quite out of sight removed from our gaze by the sweep of the hills, for it nestled cosily amid

thick masses of verdure on the slope which descended into the coombe at our back, which was almost exactly similar to the one opening before us save that the cliffs on the farther side were neither so lofty nor so steep.

There was a large party staying in the house as well as ourselves but the almost tropical heat had been too much for the ladies. They voted it too hot to do anything, and so attired in marvellous works of art which they called tea-gowns were lying down dozing comfortably over the latest novel, swinging lazily in hammocks, or in fact anything which would involve only the hollowest pretext of doing something; and so no doubt they would continue till the mystic hour of tea.

So Archer and I came out on our own account.

"Buchanan!"

There was that fellow Archer at it again.

"Buchanan, I say, Jack, do you hear?" he repeated.

"Oh, do shut up," I replied angrily.

"Jack! Do you see those people over there? I wonder what they are up to."

"People!" I ejaculated in surprise, recalling my scattered senses suddenly and looking vaguely round, "where? oh, I see. Yes, I wonder where they've sprung from."

Two dark figures moving slowly over the downs opposite and apparently advancing to the edge, that was what attracted my attention.

"That I am afraid," returned Archer somewhat sarcastically, "we are not likely to find out unless you feel inclined to walk round and inquire. A

much more reasonable question is, what are they going to do?"

"Equally impossible to answer," I replied briefly.

"I am not so sure about that. At least if you were to take these glasses and focus our unknown friends you might find out something. But I suppose that is far too much trouble."

But I was wide-awake and eager now. Even at that distance I could tell that one of the figures was that of a woman and I always felt interested in anything that wore a petticoat. Besides, a sort of reaction had set in and my laziness had vanished entirely.

I took the glasses and adjusted them with a certain amount of curiosity. It was such an out-of-the-way place that I was rather astonished that any one should be there at all. But then they might with equal reason have been astonished to see us. Perhaps after all it was only some of our own party who had developed unsuspected energy after we went; perhaps people staying at Rooklands, a place about a mile off; or possibly merely some adventurous and active visitors from the town which was not so far off from that side as from ours. Anyhow I felt curious to see what the woman was like—she might repay inspection.

The result was decidedly disappointing. After a long and careful look during which I expect I didn't improve the glasses by screwing them up and down rather recklessly in the hope of getting a better focus, I was obliged to confess that I couldn't see very much.

"Can't you see her face?" said Archer, who had been watching me impatiently.

"Not distinctly,—she is too far off. I think she is dark, but she may be any colour for all I know."

"Can you see how she's dressed?"

"Yes, dark-blue or black yachting sort of dress, with a very visible white waistcoat, man's yachting cap and large red parasol."

"Ah, that is what I have been wondering over. I saw she was carrying a thing that looked like a red flag, and it didn't strike me that it was a parasol. Any more?"

"Good figure."

"Ah, smart little craft."

"Not very little I should say. Decidedly tall, for she is taller than the man and he can't be a dwarf. Smart enough though, I believe you; as far as I can tell she looks as smart not to say rakish a craft as I have seen for some time."

"Cuts out Lady Laura?"

"It is quite a different style. The fair Laura is distinctly plump in build, not to say buxom; her enemies might even call her fat, poor thing! and insinuate that her figure is solely due to tight-lacing. Besides, she is undeniably fair. This woman I am certain is dark and looks as though she hadn't an ounce of spare flesh to carry. One of those figures you know that run in long curves and don't require any pulling in."

"Just my style," ejaculated Archer with a smile. "Go on. What is her face like?"

"Ah, that I can't tell. It looks very misty at

this distance. Besides, she keeps on moving it. She appears to be chattering away tremendously."

"Give them to me and let me try," he cried eagerly, half rising and holding out his hand.

"Wait a minute. Now I have got her," as they reached the edge of the cliff and she turned her profile towards me. "Very dark, I think; black hair certainly. I believe she is going to thump that little wretch. I wouldn't be him for something; she must be pretty strong with such a grand contour."

"Do give me the glasses," urged Archer.

"Just wait a minute. I am almost sure that she has large dark eyes and aquiline features. Why, she *has* actually punched his head; serve him right too. My God!——" And as the last ejaculation escaped in shrill horror from my lips the glasses fell from my nerveless grasp.

An awful shriek of despair rang through the air startling the echoes far up the coombe. The woman had suddenly before my very eyes hurled the man over the cliff. I sprang to my feet almost dizzy with horror, my eyes riveted on the fearful sight.

CHAPTER II.

HALF WASHED-OUT TRACKS.

He fell with horrible velocity, the body striking against the rocks and bounding from crag to crag.

Then came a loud splash and all was over. A broad ripple spread in ever-widening circles across the placid surface of the cove and that was all. The sun shone as brightly, the waves rippled on the beach with the same eternal ebb and flow, all nature smiled on us as sweetly as before. No one would have thought that a horrible crime had stained the peaceful beauty of the scene and marred the hues of paradise with the foul stains of hell.

Scarcely a minute had really elapsed since I was lying lazily on the grass coolly criticising the appearance of the wretch who had committed this dreadful deed; but it seemed as though an illimitable gulf of time separated the careless dreamer of so short a space before from the horrified, appalled witness of that hideous murder.

Archer, like myself, had risen hastily in horror, and for a moment we remained spell-bound, staring

stupidly at the murderess, who was standing at the edge of the cliff looking down into the grave of her victim. Was she waiting for the body to reappear, or what?

Suddenly she raised her head and looked in our direction. She evidently saw us for the first time, for she drew back sharply as if startled by an unexpected sight. Then, as if recognising the utter impossibility of detection at such a distance and the futility of our beginning a pursuit without giving her a start of several hours at least, she appeared to grow calmer and advanced once more to the edge of the cliff as though in defiance and derision of our powerlessness. I even fancied that I could hear a peal of mocking laughter ringing faintly in the air. But no, that must have been imagination—she was surely too far off for her laughter to reach my ears. And yet sound travels far on a calm, clear day like that.

I seized the glasses which had fallen at my feet and levelled them again, straining my eyes in the vain hope of obtaining some distinct impression of the woman's face which might enable me to recognise her again or at least to give a description which would lead to her identification and arrest.

For a few minutes she stood motionless, looking straight at me, while I strained my eyes in vain.

"Here, you try!" I cried hoarsely, handing them to Archer, who seized them and levelled them with feverish haste.

It almost seemed as if the woman realized the meaning of the action, for a sudden change came

over her. She averted her face quickly, and stretching out her arms towards us as if shaking her fist in defiance and fury, ran away over the downs. I watched her eagerly, but she never stopped or turned, and at last she disappeared from our sight behind the rising sweep of the banks in the distance.

Then Archer drew a long breath and turned towards me.

"Well, did you see her face?" I inquired anxiously.

"No; she ran off before I had got the right focus. But I noticed one thing which is worth remembering—she ran uncommonly well. I never saw a girl move so gracefully before, and as she was obviously running without any care of her personal appearance it is a very good test. I expect, Buchanan, she must be a very fine woman. I never saw such a figure. What could have tempted her to such a brutal murder?"

"We had better go back and rouse the country as soon as possible, hadn't we?" I suggested. "We can talk on the way."

"Right you are. Come along. But she's got enough start to get clear away easily enough if she plays her cards with anything like skill."

"But the waistcoat and parasol." I gasped at intervals. We were now pounding down the hill at break-neck pace. "They are awfully conspicuous."

"Oh, she will drop the latter in a ditch and get rid of the former some way or other," answered Archer much more composedly—he was in much

better training. "Trust a woman not to be stumped by such trifling details as those when her neck is at stake."

The rest of the journey was accomplished in silence—I felt I must husband my breath or I should be left ignominiously behind. In a very short time after our arrival mounted men were scouring the lanes and highways in all directions.

So well did we work that the whole district was soon in an uproar, and long before the police had decided what should be their course of action, every one in that part of the country from the village postmasters and innkeepers, great dignitaries in their way, to the casual rustic and the porters at the tiny stations, were all on the alert for the appearance of any one at all approaching the description which we gave them.

She never came, however, I may as well add. But the search became so hot, especially after the Government reward was offered, that an unlucky girl, who went about the country to give singing lessons, was stopped no less than three times in the same week at different stations simply because she wore a blue serge dress and a white waistcoat, though she was fair, short, and decidedly plump in appearance and in no way answered to the description of the murderess.

On our return we found that the body of the murdered man had been recovered, and I must confess that I took part in the examination that ensued with strange feelings of curiosity. Should we find anything that would reveal the cause of the murder? I am sure that every face in the room reflected the

same thought unless my own thoughts misled my imagination.

It was all doomed to disappointment, however. Much indeed was found, but little to the purpose.

The man was evidently not an Englishman. His appearance was decidedly foreign—I thought myself that there was a touch of the tarbrush in him, to judge from the low receding forehead and crisp black curly hair. Yet he was not very dark—not much darker than many Europeans of the warmer climates of the South. And in a coarse, savage, almost brutal way he was decidedly handsome—the purely animal beauty which would exercise such a strange, almost magnetic, influence on a woman whose fierce, passionate nature lacks the control of any deeply-rooted moral impulses.

The body was terribly broken and mangled of course but the face was wonderfully preserved. The eyes were wide open and glaring; the lips were curved in a hideous sneer, as though even in the very hour of his terrible death the victim had exulted maliciously in the thought of vengeance swift to pursue and sure to find. I hate to talk of the dead in this cold-blooded analysing way, but I am endeavouring to place before you the thoughts that really occurred to me when I first saw the body laid out for examination; and the idea which sprang at once to my brain was that this might be a man whom women would love deeply, passionately, with a love that was sport to him, but to them the bitterest degradation, ending too surely in ruin—perhaps in crime. And yet if the whole story were known in its vile details men might say that be the

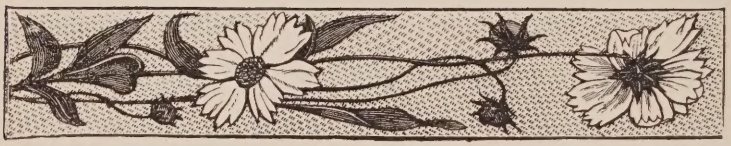
woman what she might, the man richly deserved his fate.

There was nothing to lead me to this conclusion, and yet I could not drive away the tragedy which I had conjured up after a single glance at the face of the corpse. He was probably an American, for his clothes were from a New York tailor and there was a roll of greenbacks in a pocket-book which we found in the coat-pocket. In the same pocket was a tortoise-shell card-case containing some cards bearing the words *Colonel Lucien T. St. Casse,* but that was all: there was no address and the pages of the pocket-book were a blank but for a few abstruse calculations in *dollars.* The police, however, felt that there was sufficient evidence for extending their inquiries to New York and advertising in the American papers.

There was very little result except that my suspicions were confirmed with regard to the antecedents of the man. "Colonel St. Casse" was well known as a thorough bad lot whose military rank was as questionable as his character. Even the name of St. Casse was suspected to be an *alias,* and strenuous attempts had been made to identify in him a certain Sam Hardy, a half-caste, who was wanted for a double murder and robbery committed in New Orleans five years previously. The colonel, however, had ended the attempt summarily by suddenly disappearing without leaving the slightest trace behind him and without paying certain bills due to confiding tradesmen of New York City. The description differed in one respect—that the colonel was described as a man with a thick beard and

moustache and long, fuzzy hair, whereas the murdered man was clean shaven and close cropped; but the perruquier's skill might readily account for the former appearance, easily dropped when a fresh disguise was desirable. There was little doubt in any one's mind, I think, at the end, that the man who had met his fate on the Devonshire cliffs that summer afternoon was identical with the New York rowdy on whom so many dark suspicions rested.

As for the woman, she gave no sign and appeared to have vanished as completely as if she had sunk into the earth. A reward of £1,000 offered by Government produced no result. A private reward of £100 for any clue however slight was equally inefficacious. The one trace left of her presence was a handkerchief which I found lying on the very spot where the murder was committed, just where it must have dropped,—perhaps during her flight, perhaps during the murder itself. On it were the initials "L. E. N.," twined together in a very peculiar monogram. Nothing was known of her in New York; nothing was heard of her by the London police. In fact, having once got clear away, there seemed to be no exact reason why she should not maintain her concealment successfully unless she was foolish enough to give herself up, which was hardly probable.



THE DRAMA.

CHAPTER I.

GORDON LEIGH.

FIVE years had passed since the events related in the last chapter. I had almost forgotten them except as a disagreeable reminiscence of the past. Nothing had been heard of the woman, and the British public had had so many male murderers to pet and cry over and get up petitions and demonstrations for that I expect they were entirely oblivious of this one wretched woman. Scotland Yard remembered her, no doubt, grudgingly, but even Scotland Yard must be getting gradually callous to failure by now.

Little of importance had occurred since then. Somehow I had never been to South Devon again; something had always prevented it, and being a villainous correspondent I had heard literally nothing of the Tottenhams except occasional reports at long intervals from mutual friends.

Archer I had come across with great regularity

in the winter; had even spent one winter with him in Rome,—which experience I determined to repeat as soon as possible, though circumstances had as yet interfered to prevent it. The summer, however, for the last three years, he had invariably spent in America, "shooting big game," as he phrased it; though I strongly suspect from the scanty number of trophies which he brought home that the shooting was more a pretext than anything else. And now, after a long drawn-out London season of more than usual severity I shook off the dust of the capital and departed for Homburg.

About a week after I arrived the place was about as full as it would hold. Half the English peerage dropped in gradually to recoup their shattered constitutions by a course of pine-baths and the waters of the *Elizabethen brunnen*, or the *Stahl*. French, Germans of every shade and breed, a decided sprinkling of Americans, a few Russians, and a *soupçon* of Poles—the place would have been like the tower of Babel *after* the great catastrophe but for the fact that, as your average English either cannot or will not comprehend any language but their own, far less speak any other with any pretence of fluency, and at the same time are the greatest travellers and most easily swindled of all the European nations, the ingenious natives of the Continent have found it convenient to acquire a sufficient knowledge of our language to enable them to gull us without breaking down for want of fluency. It seems in some way to exemplify the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, but in a very mixed-up and altogether topsy-turvy manner.

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the English language was more used than any other and that French and German were a decidedly bad second. It is true that in the short walk between the Hotel Victoria where I was staying and the Kursaal at the top of the Strasse one might hear quite a polyglot collection of sounds; but still most people *could* speak English; the shopkeepers dropped into it as naturally as Mr. Wegg into poetry; and even the very advertisements and placards in the shops, including their proprietor's definition of his own particular calling, were inscribed in English as well as the national tongue.

In short, an Englishman was not regarded quite so much as a miserable foreigner and hopeless madman at Homburg as at many other foreign towns I could name.

It is a lively little place and that is why I liked it. Beauty it has none except of the purely artificial type. No doubt its waters may do good to some people but I never tried them medicinally; and I must confess that the spring I frequented most was the *Ludwig,* the waters of which are not very unlike soda-water.

In fact, I came simply to amuse myself and I must confess I was not disappointed.

There was literally no end to the amusements. Dances almost every night. Excursions in all directions, including innumerable ones to Frankfurt to the opera and the Palm Garden; and no doubt, for novices, to see the statue of Ariadne, the Cathedral, and other sights that don't bear inspection too

often. Then there were picnics to an unlimited range of romantic spots all along the verdure-clad slopes of the Taunus Mountains, including a drive through a queer old Huguenot village to the Saalberg and a ramble round the newly-renovated, and somewhat incongruously-new, ancient Roman camp, winding up naturally with coffee at a delightful rustic coffee garden and a hunt for pine-cones amid the silent giants of the grand old forest.

Well, then for those spirits to whom mere scenery offered no charm, there were the tennis courts down in the Park, where an active player with a number of friends and a talent for organization might play from early morn to dewy eve without infringing the letter of the rule which forbade the same person to take a court for more than an hour. And then there were delightful shrubbery-like paths winding in and out among the woods in the most unexpected manner. There were all sorts of nooks and corners which seemed naturally adapted for flirtations. There were promenades where the band played, and it played nearly all the day. There were places where one might drink new milk, places where one might eat fresh honey, places where one might combine coffee, curaçoa, and cigarettes; places where one might do almost anything that the most active mind could suggest and the most jaded mind enjoy, all in the open air too. A human being would indeed have a remarkable character if he or she couldn't find *something* to do at Homburg; even the most frail and feeble of the invalids might find a never-ending source of amusement in watching the numerous

flirtations which sprang up as rapidly as Jonah's gourd to die as suddenly, and in noting how soon the first bloom of a honeymoon was rubbed off in the incessant whirl of pleasure.

And the season was really only just beginning. People were merely rushing in to get rooms in time before the crush. For the German Autumn Manœuvres were to take place there later, and the place would be flooded with a raging sea of princes, marshals, generals, military authorities and dignitaries of every kind and clime—including, no doubt, half the crowned heads of Europe and our own Albert Edward and his sweet Princess as well.

In the evening after *table d'hôte* I usually strolled up to the Kursaal to have coffee in the verandah, where one could listen to the band and watch the crowds surging and swaying backwards and forwards on the terrace until the time came to adjourn to the dancing-room. A pretty sight it was undoubtedly. The ladies usually appeared in the most charming semi-evening costumes, with every variety of dainty clinging wrap to keep the chill breath of the evening from their delicate frames; and the soft subdued shades of colour blended harmoniously with ever-varying effect as they moved to and fro like the shifting rainbows of a kaleidoscope. Beyond were the fountains and gardens—the whole shut in by the darkening canopy of night overhead. Somewhere near, but invisible from the verandah, the band of the Kursaal were discoursing the dreamiest German waltzes with infinite feeling and expression.

The verandah itself was crammed with people,

sitting round marble tables, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, chattering, flirting, romancing wildly. White-aproned waiters meanwhile were dodging in and out with marvellous dexterity, balancing trays full of cups, glasses, every kind of obstinate and breakable ware, at the most impossible angles, and yet by some miracle of luck or skill never upsetting any of them.

But I must introduce you to Gordon Leigh, and in order to do so I must digress a little.

I first met Gordon Leigh a year before, under very peculiar circumstances, and without exaggeration I may say that I owe it to that meeting that I am able to tell you about him now. It was at Monte Carlo. I had been backing the red with considerable success and departed from the *salon* with several thousand francs in my pockets. Passing a dark corner I received a violent blow on the head which rendered me insensible, and I remember nothing more till I became suddenly aware that I was sitting on a sofa and a strange young man was bathing my forehead with cold water. This was Gordon Leigh. He had found me lying insensible, so he told me, and like a good Samaritan had ministered to my necessities. My winnings were of course irretrievably gone and I never discovered any clue to my assailant.

Naturally we saw a good deal of one another afterwards, and the chance acquaintance ripened into a sincere friendship, at least on my side. I felt that I almost owed my life to this man, and that would have made me like him had he been the most repellent creature on the face of the earth. But

there was nothing repellent about Gordon Leigh. On the contrary there was something irresistibly attractive, almost fascinating, if the expression can be applied to a man, and I felt strangely drawn to him from the very first. I don't know what it was; sometimes I thought the fascination lay in his dark eyes which were beautiful almost as a woman's, with long dark lashes such as many women would give their souls to possess. Sometimes I thought it was in his smile: a bright kindly smile under the thick black moustache, a smile that seemed to me to betoken a frank, honest, open nature which shows its real feelings without pretence or concealment. I think now it was a subtle something in his manner, an indescribable *Je ne sais quoi* which invited confidence, promised sympathy, and disarmed hostility at once. There was something almost womanly perhaps about him which made men feel that they could treat him and trust him in a different way from ordinary men and yet without fear of treachery and the venomed chatter of an angry woman's tongue. Certainly it is a fact that men always did confide in Gordon Leigh and I never heard one of his confidants complain of his disloyalty. But this womanliness was all on the surface. It went no farther than his soft gentle manner, his beautiful eyes, small white hands, slender figure, and pale delicate-looking face. I knew that Gordon Leigh had nerves of iron which quailed not in the deadliest danger, that he was an unerring shot whose duelling performances were talked of all along the Riviera, and that he had won himself a name for calm determined recklessness which out-Heroded in the

eyes of the foreigner even the madness of the average Englishman and bordered on the demoniac.

My own private impression on the subject was that Gordon Leigh was not really the desperate fire-eater that he was popularly supposed to be, but that he found himself obliged to atone for his lack of the physical size and strength, which so easily shoulders its way through the world unmolested, by creating a general impression that he was a dangerous man to meddle with or insult.

Which I suppose he would have been really by the bye, for in addition to his shooting skill I believe he was deadly dexterous with the foils.

You may imagine my delight therefore when the first person I met on entering the bureau of the Victoria was Gordon Leigh sipping a green *chartreuse* and chatting away in his genial fashion to my old friend the herculean manager.

And now Gordon Leigh and I were taking our coffee together in the verandah as we had done pretty nearly every evening since my arrival.

We were talking away generally:—at least Gordon was, for his powers of conversation were unlimited. He could talk on almost any subject with the greatest fluency and apparent pleasure—that is except one, for unlike most talkative men he never talked about himself and his brothers, in fact I didn't know whether he had got any of the latter, and his modesty and reserve, whichever it was, went so far that the little I knew about him—and precious little it was by the bye—had been more the result of casual questioning on my part than talking on his.

It amounted to this :—he had no family, at least none he could claim. He had started in life with only a modest competence, but had struck oil in America and cleared a handsome fortune by his luck. Since then he had been a cosmopolitan, roving about the gay places of the world with no home, claiming no nationality. He accounted for his dislike of the female sex by the fact that he had been unfortunate in a love-affair—jilted for a better match under circumstances of pure mercenary heartlessness—and was bitter about women generally in consequence. That was all.

"Of course, old fellow," he wound up, with an appealing look in his eyes, "there is more than I have told you, but what is the good of raking it up? I have given you a general outline in return for your confidence, but it would pain me considerably to go into details."

Poor handsome Gordon Leigh! What did it matter to me? I had no wish to pain him, still less when he looked at me like that. I said as much and the subject ended.

We have finished our coffee by now. I am leaning over the parapet gazing on the terrace at the passers-by. Gordon Leigh, whose interest in the fair sex is not so vivid as mine, reclines comfortably in his chair and smokes a tiny cigarette twirled daintily by those nimble fingers that are firm as a rock on a hair-trigger.

"Hallo, Gordon!" I ejaculated suddenly, "here is a new face, and, by George, a very pretty one—that tall dark girl in the big hat with the crimson feathers. I wonder who she is."

"Dark-blue hussar jacket, do you mean?" inquired Gordon, displaying unusual interest, "walking with that big fair man."

"Yes. Why surely I know that face. It's Archer, of course."

"Do you mean the girl or the man?"

"Man of course. Don't know the girl from Adam, or Eve rather. But the man's an intimate friend, capital fellow!"

"Pretty girl," said Gordon indifferently.

"Yes," I replied, hardly attending; "I must go and talk to him. Haven't seen him for a long time. I will bring them up here, Gordon, so you needn't bolt unless anything more attractive turns up."

"Oh, I'll wait here," returned Gordon Leigh; "I should like to be introduced to that girl. She looks a good sort."

This by the bye was very unusual praise on Gordon Leigh's part.

Hardly noticing it, however, I made my way down to the terrace, and after a little dodging in and out of the crowd found myself face to face with the objects of my search.

"Why, Buchanan, this *is* a surprise. Who would have thought to see you here? But I might have known that you are sure to be found wherever the gay world drifts to. But stop, let me introduce you to my wife.

"I dare say you are surprised," continued Archer, after introducing me to the tall, dark beauty who had made such an impression on Gordon Leigh, "but the marriage was a very sudden affair. To tell the truth we eloped, for Eva's father wouldn't

hear of our marrying till she was twenty-five, Heaven only knows why, and that meant waiting two years—a preposterous time. So we stayed not on the order of our going, but got married at once and took the first steamer for Europe. I forgot to say that Eva's father lives at New York. And here we are."

"Doing the honeymoon," said Eva with a smile and a slight blush.

Really she was a magnificent creature, and I don't wonder at Archer's unwillingness to wait two whole years for his happiness. She was of the type known as fine: tall, grandly built, with massive shoulders and a well-developed bust, altogether as fine a specimen of womanhood as Archer was of the opposite sex, and it struck me that nothing less than his powerful frame would have been a match for hers; a smaller man would have looked undersized beside her and would have probably had a very bad time of it in conjugal disputes. I was conscious that I looked smaller than she did though no doubt I was considerably the taller; and as for Gordon Leigh, who was at least two inches shorter, he would have seemed a mere shrimp. But in spite of her height and massive build there was not the slightest trace of coarseness, nothing of the masculine. Her features were finely and clearly cut, of an eagle type which gave her a very commanding expression as a rule though she could soften it with the gentlest glance of love and tenderness when she looked up into her husband's face. Brilliant *brunette* as she was with her rich, dark complexion, dark sparkling eyes, and heavy tresses of dark hair

coiled away at the back of her head, there was not the faintest shadow on the upper lip, her skin was as pure and clear as if she were the fairest of her sex, and the beautiful red of her cheek melted so delicately into snowy white that only a veritable misogynist could have complained that she had too much colour. Her beautifully-shaped head was set firmly on a neck like a pillar of Corinthian marble and carried with the port and dignity of an empress. No one would have imagined that this majestic creature was a newly-married young girl of twenty-three. I should have put her down as a dignified matron of twenty-eight at the very least, that is if I had met her alone. But when she was with her husband it was impossible to make any mistake.

The scent of the honeymoon hung round them too obtrusively. There was far too much tenderness in her glance, too much of clinging dependence in her air, too much of enraptured submission in her very attitude when she caught Archer's eye or when her own rested on him for any but the most dunderheaded observer not to discover the state of affairs pretty soon.

"Well, I am glad you've taken this little village *en route*. Shall you be here long? It is a capital place, I can assure you," I remarked.

"We don't quite know yet," replied the tall beauty with the prettiest little accent in the world, just enough to show she was American-born and sounding so quaintly from those ripe scarlet lips; "it depends how we like it. We did Paris first, and then we came on here. We shall go about

generally and stop wherever it's lively and see everything right away."

"Great fun, I should think," I replied.

"Immense, my dear fellow," said Archer with a chuckle. "It's better than any amount of bachelor travelling."

"And then I've never been out of America before," added his wife, "and so it's all new to me and charming. Paris was simply delightful. Oh, we had a lovely time."

"You can put in a very good time here if you go to work the right way," I suggested insidiously, for I really wanted them to stay.

"All right, old chap; tell us all about it. What do you do here? What's the regular thing?"

"Oh, do tell," murmured his wife in her gentle tones.

So I told, and made the most of it—in fact praised up the place as though I had an interest in the number of visitors staying there, and gave the two to understand that this was a mere *entrée* to the more solid dishes which would follow when the manœuvres began.

Mrs. Archer listened with very flattering attention, asked no end of questions, and kept up a running fire of ejaculations of delight.

I could see she wasn't a bit shy—I never knew an American girl who was—and had a decided individuality of her own; but I could also see pretty plainly that she was well in harness at present, for she gave no opinion when I had finished, evidently waiting for her husband's.

"It sounds nice enough," said Archer, "but

I strongly suspect that it will be a little too gay if anything. Anyhow we can stay a few days and see."

"That will be lovely," echoed the dark beauty.

"You had better come into the dancing-room now," I remarked, noticing that the band had stopped and the people were deserting the terraces and hurrying into the Kursaal. "There is a small public dance on to-night, and that will give you some slight idea of the people and the place. I should like to introduce you to a friend of mine, a charming fellow, and an excellent dancer. I am sure you will like him."

But Archer demurred, and his wife thereupon declined sweetly on the score of fatigue. I dare say, however, that Archer was not violently keen on introductions of charming young men to his wife quite so early in the day. Anyhow it struck me when I turned round to cast a last glance at their retreating figures that they looked more as if they were starting for a ramble down in the woods and lime-walks than going back to their hotel.

I dare say they went down to the springs and strolled along the lovely moonlit avenues in the sweetest of converse, enjoying their own society in the mysterious way that lovers do, entirely free from the fears which would have beset an ordinary commonplace mortal like myself. Catch me going down and promenading about in light summer clothes amid the chill dews and damp salt exhalations which rise round the springs as the evening closes in. Romance is all very well in its way, but there is a disagreeable reality about rheumatism and lumbago that would spoil the flavour of the wildest

romance—I should certainly have thought several times before I risked them. But I suppose really they wanted to get away from me and my "charming" friends and be alone with themselves and their love.

Very natural too.

"It's no go, Gordon," I cried to the dark, handsome face turned inquiringly up at me when I returned to our table, "newly-married couple, honeymoon, and all that sort of thing. Perfect savages at present, hardly fit for civilized society. In short, they prefer their own company to ours, though the lady covers her lord's tell-tale silence with a pretty little fib. She is a pretty girl, or rather a fine woman, and I think will prove charming on better acquaintance. Oddly enough she seemed to remind me of somebody I had seen before, Heaven only knows who, but her figure and face were decidedly familiar, and yet she has never been out of America and I have never been in it."

"No accounting for fancies," returned Gordon Leigh. "And this Mr. Archer, who is he? Is he a very dear friend?"

"Yes," I replied heartily, "he is indeed." And I entered into a glowing narrative. "Besides," I concluded, "there is a bond between us of a mysterious adventure, much as there is between you and me only of a very different kind."

I told him about the murder on the cliff and it produced a most extraordinary effect on him. He turned pale and then red and then deadly pale again.

"My God!" he gasped when I had finished, "what a wonderful coincidence that you of all people should be there just then."

"Wasn't it?" I replied. "Because I don't go to Devonshire so very often, and in fact I have never been there since, and then I am not usually a walker and hate climbing hills. So that when I think of the number of lucky circumstances fitting in, not forgetting Archer having lugged those glasses up, it seems almost Providential, doesn't it?"

"I don't see that exactly," said Gordon Leigh with a laugh—he had recovered completely now. "My dear fellow, nothing followed that I can see. The woman you say was never found. And though you appear to have a very good idea of what she was like, I don't suppose you could swear to her. You may think it absurd, but it seems to me that your description applies word for word to this Mrs. Archer we have seen to-night. It may apply equally well to a dozen other women. Then, where are you?"

"By Heaven!" I cried startled, "so it does. No doubt that is what made her face seem familiar. Yes, she is singularly like. But you may sneer as much as you will, Gordon. I firmly believe that it *was* Destiny that so strangely made me the witness of that terrible crime. I believe that Destiny will sooner or later throw the murderess across my path again unlikely as it may seem and the heaviest retribution will fall on the evil-doer."

"You are quite a fatalist," said Gordon with a low laugh and a strange glitter in his eyes.

"Take care that you do not strike down the innocent instead of the guilty."

"No fear of that," I returned very seriously. "If it is destined that this murder should be avenged by my agency there is no fear of mistakes or errors. All will work smoothly to the appointed end."

"Let us go in doors. It is getting chilly out here," said Gordon, rising with a slight shiver. "For all you know," he added seriously, "the woman may have been an injured innocent and the man the basest of ruffians and so on."

"Yes, she may. I have always thought it most probable. But murder, you know——"

"Yes, of course, murder, you know! Come into the Gold Room, Monsieur the Fatalist, or you will be gravely suspecting Mrs. Archer next, or Heaven knows who. I think I shall start the idea that *I* did it, in disguise, you know—I am sure I should make a very fine woman if I dressed up."

"No you wouldn't," I returned laughing, but slightly irritable. "Far too thin; you might make up as a slip of a girl, but you would want an awful lot of padding to make you look at all a decent figure. Besides, hang it, my dear fellow, this woman was as tall as—er—er—as Mrs. Archer. What are you laughing at?"

For Gordon Leigh was choking with half-suppressed merriment.

"At your impertinence. Thin indeed! It isn't every one who is a porpoise. I consider myself a very good figure." And he choked again.

"Do you," I replied, still very irritable, for it is

so aggravating when one is talking seriously for a ribald jester to poke fun at one and then roar in this idiotic way. "Well, it is a good thing *you* think so. However, I must beg you to treat this subject seriously and not talk any more nonsense as it is too real and horrible for joking."

"Oh, if you take offence like that," said Gordon Leigh, swinging round suddenly, and stalking off with his head in the air.

I am a fool at times, I know, but I couldn't let this hot-headed little spitfire go off in that abrupt and stupid way, though I felt that he had no business to behave in such a manner. Still, to break up our friendship so suddenly and all for nothing, it was too absurd.

"Leigh!" I cried, hurrying after him, "Gordon, don't be a fool, man. Surely you will never quarrel seriously for such a trifle. I am sorry if I hurt your feelings. There, will that do. And I am sure you would make a splendid woman if you dressed up. There's an ample apology. And you aren't thin—rather fat, in fact. Will that do?"

"Yes," said Gordon Leigh, flushing scarlet and looking very silly and not at all the dare-devil he was supposed to be. "You are a good fellow, Jack. I am sorry I teased you."

And so we went into the dancing-room and were soon whirling in the mazy waltz. As I have said, Gordon Leigh was an excellent dancer, and I think I may add without conceit that I am no mean performer. So I very soon forgot all about the murder, the Archers, and our ridiculous squabble.

But as we came back to the Victoria, Gordon

Leigh drew the conversation on to Archer's lovely wife and we discussed her until we separated to go to bed.

"Don't dream about the dark beauty," laughed Gordon, as he departed in *his* direction.

"Never fear. Shouldn't much mind if I did," I replied from *my* direction which was exactly opposite.

"Much more likely that you will," I thought to myself, "unless I am very much mistaken, Master Gordon is distinctly impressed. What a queer chap he is. I can't help liking the fellow."

Then it struck me that I hadn't had a cognac and seltzer as I had intended. Happy thought—go back to the smoking room and have it. Which I did and went to bed very late in consequence.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS CRY.

Towards morning, however, I started up shaking all over with the cold perspiration breaking out in icy drops on my forehead and answered wildly to a loud cry which had rung through the depths of my slumber and awoke me.

I listened eagerly for the cry to be repeated or for some movement to indicate where it came from, but not a sound saluted my eager ears. All was as silent as the grave. I got out of bed and looked out of the window into the garden. There was not a soul stirring; the whole earth seemed buried in sleep; even the birds had not yet begun to twitter among the trees.

I slipped gently across the floor on tip-toe, opened my door with the greatest care to prevent its creaking, and listened along the passage, holding my breath in the keenness of my attention. The only sound I could hear was the ticking of a distant clock somewhere along the passage.

It must have been a horrid dream I thought at last with a smile of relief, and I like a silly child,

had been frightened at the sound of my own voice after all.

Strangely enough, however, I could not remember anything but the loud shriek which had awoke me. What had preceded it? What had I been dreaming about? I had not the slightest idea. All that I knew was that for the moment I was under the full impression that I had been awoke by a piercing cry of distress, as of some person invoking aid against an assassin.

But I did not feel disposed to start on a ramble round the numerous dark passages in the hotel on the chance of hearing some stray fragment of a groan or cry anywhere which would justify me in alarming the house. Nor was I exactly disposed to run the risk of a general chorus of ridicule and wrath by waking up my neighbours on such decidedly shadowy grounds.

Therefore, after sitting for some time on the edge of the bed and turning the subject over again in my mind with the greatest indecision, I came to the conclusion that it would be far better to return to bed instead of sitting up any longer in this idiotic way with the cold wind from the open window playing about my bare legs and feet, and thereby risking a violent cold which would considerably interfere with the enjoyment of the rest of my visit to Homburg.

So I went back to bed and slept peacefully, undisturbed by any more visions, until the *mädchen* roused me at six in the morning under the fond impression that I was going down to the springs as usual to drink the waters and listen to the band.

Not at all. I did not feel in the humour for such vagaries; and I may briefly add with a slight tinge of shame that my *cotelettes, pommes de terres frites* and *petits croisats* were not finished on this particular morning till the greater number of the inmates of the hotel had gone down to the Lawn Tennis Ground,—that is, till nearly eleven o'clock.

CHAPTER III.

THE LOCKET.

The Archers stayed of course and at the Victoria; but they had a way of going off for solitary excursions or rambling about among the woods by themselves which was wildly aggravating to a friend. In short, they were madly in love and behaved as irresponsible people generally do.

However, they sobered down a little by the end of a week, and even consented to come to a dance at the Kursaal with the general proviso that they were not going to dance much.

This practically meant that they danced chiefly together, and that Archer stood scowling like a fiend in a corner during the very rare intervals when his wife was allowed to dance with any one else.

Any one else means me and Gordon Leigh, for Mrs. Archer declined any more introductions for that particular night; I suppose in accordance with orders issued to that effect.

I was rather disappointed to find that she didn't get on with Gordon Leigh as I had expected. I

could see in a minute that she wasn't taken with him at first. She measured him, so to speak, with a sweeping glance from top to toe and I knew that the result of the scrutiny was unsatisfactory. I suppose her taste ran decidedly to big men and that poor Gordon didn't come up to the standard of her fancy. Perhaps after all it was merely that she didn't really care for any man except her husband at present and looked on the rest of the male sex more or less as interlopers.

However, she danced with him and they talked violently.

"How do you like her?" I inquired later on. "Does she come up to your expectation?"

"Yes, she's nice enough," he replied, indifferently. "But you know she is too big for me to dance with comfortably, and I became painfully aware of it when it came to steering in that mad hurly-burly of lunatics."

"Why didn't you let her steer you?"

"She couldn't steer *me*. I am not such a feather-weight as all that," replied Gordon Leigh sharply almost angrily.

I made a mental resolution to make no more allusions to his size or weight. How touchy the man was on the subject!

"Where's the scornful widow?" inquired Gordon Leigh with a laugh after a slight pause, during which I should have imagined that he was trying to recover his equanimity if there had been anything to disturb it seriously.

"How you do dislike that woman!" I returned. "And I can't make out why."

"She can't bear me. Isn't that a good reason?"

"But you ought to like one another; she ought to be just your style, she's fair, and you're dark, she's tall, and you are—about her height, or taller." Hang it! there was I, nearly putting my foot into it again. "Besides, she is beautiful and fascinating, and, and——"

"She may be all that, but I don't see that it much matters,

'If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be.'

Not that she is rude or disagreeable, you know. On the contrary, she is polite enough; but she always reminds me of the 'maiden fair to see,' and I trust her not,

'Trust her not, she is fooling thee.'"

"Perhaps she is fooling *me*, but I should very much like to see the woman who could fool you, Gordon. She ought to be given a prize medal and be put in a museum."

"Yes," replied Gordon Leigh, laughing with a singular intonation, "I think so too. I suppose it is that the burnt child fears the fire. But there is the scornful widow and she is obviously looking for you."

The scornful widow in question was Lady Mabel Mornington, a great friend of mine, who really deserves more than a mere passing mention.

An earl's only daughter and heiress, and the widow of a wealthy commoner who had barely tasted the sweets of matrimony when he was hur-

ried away from further enjoyment by the hand of the Destroyer. She had been spoilt from her youth up, had never known what it was to be thwarted, hardly even to be contradicted, and had no more idea of controlling her temper or hiding her displeasure when put out than she had of flying over the moon. She claimed the prerogative of being as odd as she pleased and she exercised it to the full much to the embarrassment of her friends at times. She was a mass of contradictions —never in the same mood for ten minutes together and changing to the most startling extremes with a rapidity that was perfectly alarming. Tall, well developed, with every angle and bend of her body rounded into the most voluptuous curves, she could lay claim to the possession of a magnificent figure; her body was as straight as a dart; her delicately-shaped head was poised most perfectly on a rounded neck that rivalled the driven snow by its exquisite whiteness.

There was an ineffable air of distinction about her which marked her out at once from the common herd and which combined with her splendid figure would have attracted general attention in the largest crowd. At times she carried herself with a *hauteur* that was almost insufferable, and she could sweep past any unfortunate who had incurred her ire with such intolerable scorn depicted on every feature as to completely unsettle the nerves of the most angrily determined woman. Some men asserted that she was the most beautiful of her sex; others that she was almost the reverse. I had seen her under both aspects. When she was

pleased, a glad light came into her great violet eyes a soft smile played over her little red mouth and a dainty dimple twinkled bewitchingly in her rounded cheek till she looked the very incarnation of beauty and happiness. But when anything went wrong, the delicate outline of her features hardened in the most extraordinary way till the soft curves of her face seemed ruled into straight, harsh lines, a cruel jeering glitter shone in her eyes, and her lips compressed tight together till they were thin and bitter and charged with all the venom of a poisoned heart. In this mood she was a Fury—not the mythical Fury armed with snakes and torches and changing men to stone with the horror of her look,—but a well-bred Fury who relied on her cold, cruel words, her galling sneer, and her insolent carriage to crush the miserable wretch who had ventured to brave her resentment. A handsome woman in fact, whose acquaintance was eagerly sought though often and often like Dead Sea fruit it turned to bitter ashes in the end.

We had long been friends. I really liked her excessively and put up with a great deal of eccentricity knowing her to be thoroughly good at heart. I thought she liked me too, to some extent. At any rate she tolerated me more than she did most of her acquaintance and was certainly less scornful and aggravating than to the rest of the world.

She was seated on a sofa looking very *distraite* and bored. Her companion, a German officer, the Baron von Bierbrunnen, who was renowned as a great lady-killer, was talking violently to her with a great deal of gesticulation, but from her look I

should very much question whether she was listening to him. She appeared to be contemplating her black gauze fan or at intervals casting a glance round the room.

Suddenly our eyes met and immediately she made an imperious little signal which I well understood and always obeyed unhesitatingly though it frequently struck me afterwards that I allowed her to treat me very much as if I were a slave bound to the caprices of that delicate white hand which summoned me so imperiously.

She took my arm at once and we moved away to another part of the *salon*.

"Who is that woman you were talking to?" she demanded abruptly; "the great, tall, unwieldy creature with the Jewish style of face."

"A certain Mrs. Archer, the wife of a great friend of mine. And she is not Jewish but American."

"Is she horridly vulgar like most of these dreadful Americans one meets?"

"Not a bit; thorough lady; no twang at all."

"Oh!" this very shortly and huffily.

"I think you would like her."

"I am *sure* I shouldn't. She is a great flirt, isn't she?"

"Flirt!" I cried in genuine astonishment. "Not at all. Quite the reverse. What makes you think that?"

"Why, she has been flirting *disgracefully* with that fair man."

"Excuse my rudeness," I said, laughing heartily, "but that—that's her husband."

"Her husband! Is the woman mad?"

"They've just been married. It is a desperate love affair and they are still frightfully in love."

"Oh," said Lady Mabel, evidently much more satisfied, though what it could have mattered to her I couldn't imagine,—surely she didn't consider it necessary to supervise the conduct of my friends, "that's a good thing—for him."

"Are you satisfied now?" I inquired with a smile.

"*I* don't care. Why should I? But I can see that *you* are very much taken with her."

"Am I? Well, I haven't discovered it yet. I think she is nice and pleasant, you know, and I like her; but it is impossible to be very much taken with a girl who has no eyes for any one but her husband. It is a waste of time, to put it mildly."

"Quite right," she answered; "only an idiot would run after a woman who didn't care for him."

"Or a man. It applies equally. I never can make out how people manage to care for those who don't care for them. And yet women continually break their hearts for men who don't care a rush for them."

"Yes, I know," she replied almost bitterly, "but women *are* idiots. Besides, they feel more than you heartless men. Take me into the dancing-room."

I didn't like the tone of her last remark at all. It was far too commanding, and the worst of it was that it came out so naturally and she so obviously expected immediate obedience that it was quite evident she imagined that she could order me about as she chose.

I felt annoyed, and I suppose I showed it, for when we stopped again she suddenly turned on me and said in the most abrupt manner:

"You are offended with me—I know you are. What have I done?"

I protested of course the usual commonplaces.

"No," she replied anxiously; "I know that is not true. You can't deceive me. I know from your manner there is something wrong. What have I done? For Heaven's sake tell me what I have done."

"Nothing," I assured her again and again. Really the whole thing was too absurd.

"I know it is something," she almost whimpered discontentedly with a very unhappy look. "I *know* I have done something dreadful—I am always doing dreadful things. You might tell me. If you were a real friend you would tell me."

"I assure you——" I began.

"Will you forgive me, then?"

"There is nothing to forgive."

"Say you forgive me, or you will make me intensely miserable; and surely you can't be cruel and heartless enough to wish to do that."

"No; on the contrary," I returned earnestly, "I like you far too well. I forgive you entirely and I was an idiot to feel vexed—for I was a little vexed, I'll admit."

"That is nice of you," she murmured softly, a sweet smile irradiating her face and a delicate flush of colour stealing over her cheek, "but I should so like to know what vexed you." This was said in the most pleading tones.

"Better not ask; I have forgotten."

"You might tell me."

"Now you must be good, and not ask."

"Well, I will try. But it is desperately hard work," she said with a sigh. "You've aroused my curiosity dreadfully."

I shifted the conversation.

"Where's your Mr. Gordon Leigh?" she inquired after an interval. "I thought you couldn't go anywhere without him."

"He was in the room a minute ago but I don't see him now. Do you think, then, that we are inseparable?"

"Very nearly."

"He's such a good fellow. You've no idea."

"H'm. Is he?" This last remark was delivered in such a tone of sulky contempt that it was far more emphatic than the strongest negative. Again I shifted the conversation. Certainly Lady Mabel was very *difficile* to-night. I began to feel almost annoyed. Why did she persistently abuse every one I liked? It wasn't friendly, hardly polite even.

I escaped shortly in consequence and claimed a dance with Mrs. Archer. Archer looked as wretched at having to surrender her as if they were parting for good and all; but the dark beauty assented at once and we were soon whirling round the room. I may add that I didn't find her difficult to manage at all.

A few turns and then I took her back to her husband for I had no desire to get into his black books.

"Who do you think is coming here to-morrow?" he said, smiling with evident approval at my discretion.

"Haven't an idea," I replied indifferently; and then my eyes were attracted by a locket which Eva wore round her neck hanging from a gold chain. It was an ordinary enough locket in itself, but there was a very peculiar monogram engraved on it which seemed strangely familiar to me though I couldn't for the life of me recall anything I had ever seen like it. I wasn't near enough to see the initials, and as I moved nearer to her to examine it, she turned towards her husband and frustrated my manœuvres. I decided to leave the matter for a more convenient time.

"Do you remember our old friend Tottenham?" Archer had continued meanwhile.

"Of course. What a capital time we used to spend there."

"Well, he is coming, and his wife and little girl. Have you ever seen the little girl?"

"Not that I can remember, except perhaps in a very juvenile state."

"Well, she is a most fascinating little girl."

"When you say little girl, do you mean very little?"

"About fifteen really but very precocious and great fun. If you'll take my advice you will cultivate her and train her in the way she ought to go with a view to transforming her into Mrs. Buchanan in a couple of years. You must be tired of this miserable, homeless, bachelor state."

"Listen to Benedick the married man! Your

influence, Mrs. Archer, is really remarkable, for he was a most rampant bachelor in the old days. But what is the use of my falling in love with this child if we've got to wait two years?—two whole years, you know," I said, mimicking Archer's own tone—"a preposterous time."

Mrs. Archer laughed and blushed, and just for a moment I saw the locket again plainly—but still I couldn't make out the monogram.

"You certainly had me there," said her spouse; "but you might do much worse. She is a most engaging child, and very pretty."

"Probably go off by the time she's seventeen, pretty children nearly always do."

"Oh, Mr. Buchanan," cried Eva reproachfully, "you are really *too* dreadful. You deserve to fall violently in love with some one who doesn't care a bit for you. It would be quite a judgment on you for talking so."

"I expect that that is exactly what would happen to me if I followed your advice and cultivated this fascinating and precocious child. Children of that kind generally have a will of their own now-a-days."

"Well, anyhow they are coming, and they've got rooms at the Victoria so you will have plenty of opportunities."

Shortly afterwards the Archers went home, and I accompanied them in the hope of getting another look at that locket. But evil chance willed it that it had turned over and a view of the plain back was the only reward I obtained for my exertions. When they had gone, I reproached myself for not having drawn it into the conversation and asked if I might

look at it. There would have been no harm in doing so and I should have gratified my curiosity.

Never mind, I could do it next time I saw them. After all it wasn't a matter of such vital importance. Any one would almost imagine that I thought Eva had stolen it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FASCINATING CHILD.

Two days later, early in the afternoon, just about lunch-time in fact, I rushed straight into the arms of Mr. Tottenham himself who was standing in the porch in a very aimless manner.

"Why, how are you, my dear fellow? Archer told me you were here. How well you are looking. We have only arrived about a couple of hours. Here, Nellie, tell your mother we have found Buchanan. What a fellow you are. Why haven't you written this long time? Why, Nellie, child!—oh, here she is." And Mr. Tottenham stopped abruptly as Mrs. Tottenham appeared on the scene.

Tottenham didn't seem changed in the very least. The same ruddy-faced, red-whiskered, dapper little man, who looked the thorough sportsman he was all over, and as jolly as ever. Mrs. Tottenham was a tall, portly, good-tempered dame, with a very high colour, who had been a great beauty once and never forgot it. Even now she retained traces of good looks by which one could realize how much the lapse of time and excess of good-living had

injured the face which had been a reigning toast in earlier days.

I couldn't imagine what had brought them to Homburg of all places in the world, and just as the shooting was going to begin too.

It appeared that the doctor had ordered her to take the waters—why, was no doubt best known to himself.

"So here we are for twenty-one days," concluded little Tottenham quite piteously; "and it almost breaks my heart to think that they'll begin with the partridges at home next week and I shan't be there. Such a thing has never happened before that Greylands was empty on the first of September. But I would do anything for my Minnie," he added apologetically; "I think I would even give up the pheasants if it would do her any good."

"Dear me, how you do talk, John," interposed his better-half languidly as became an invalid. "I am sure these family details cannot be very interesting to Mr. Buchanan. I hear," she added, turning to me with her most gracious smile, "that you are quite an *habitué* of this place. Really, I shall expect you to tell us what we ought to do."

"I shall be most happy to pilot you round the place any time you like," I hastened to assure her.

"Really it will be most kind of you for we are quite outer-barbarians as it were. But there's one thing I wish you could manage for us. I heard something from Mrs. Archer about a Lawn Tennis Club—do you think you could get our little Nellie's name put down for it? It would be so kind of you if you would for I am afraid it will be so dull for

the poor child if we cannot find her some amusement."

I had long been conscious of a slim, white-robed figure standing back in the shadow of Mrs. Tottenham's portly presence; but at these words it moved suddenly forward and I found myself face to face with the prettiest little *nez retroussé* and the largest, loveliest blue eyes in the world. A pair of rosy lips half-parted and disclosing a set of the pearliest teeth completed the picture which for the moment struck me completely dumb.

"Oh, mama!" remarked this apparition eagerly, throwing back a large mane of tawny golden locks with an impatient toss of its head, "that would be simply lovely."

This I suppose was the fascinating child.

Well, certainly Archer wasn't wrong as far as appearance went. The child was—to use her own expression—simply lovely. And now it struck me that perhaps it was not entirely the unadulterated pleasure of talking to the parrot which had attracted such a number of men suddenly into the garden this afternoon. For though they were certainly assembled in a dense mass round the cage in which that unamiable bird was conducting a rather mixed conversation consisting of disconnected fragments of various languages, yet they looked a great deal more in our direction than could be wholly attributable to chance. I also noticed that there was an immense deal of promenading going on about the garden and that the promenaders who were chiefly men contrived to pass us a good deal oftener than was absolutely necessary. The male inmates of the

hotel had evidentally discovered the little Nellie before I had.

What was she really like ?

Faith, it is hard to say.

My first idea was that if ever I tried to paint an angel I should endeavour to get Nellie to sit to me for her portrait by way of a beginning. But no one heard of an angel with a *nez retroussé;* and I am sure that no angel ever went about in a creamy flannel, half-yachting, half-tennis dress, trimmed with dark navy blue braid, or a regular man-o'-war's-man's cloth cap, set rakishly on the side of her head, with a cluster of blue ribbons trailing down among the luxurious tresses of the tawny mane before referred to. I am quite sure, too, that no angel ever blushed such a vivid red as this little lady did when she discovered my eyes fixed on her.

She wasn't particularly little, by the bye. She was a fine, tall, well-grown girl with a figure that gave promise of exquisite symmetry and altogether looking a great deal older than her real age or the style of her dress.

I looked at her as she turned her head aside in pretty confusion and caught the outline of her profile which was even more enticing than her full face. By the way that is the word that describes her best. She certainly was enticing. It was a face exceedingly attractive and yet slightly malicious. A pert little tip-tilted nose—not much to boast of in noses not remarkable for dignity or correctness ; and yet piquant in expression withal. A mouth which was really a little too large, and yet so perfectly shaped like a Cupid's bow that only

the most fastidious critic could have complained. Complexion of rose and cream so delicately blended that it was impossible to say where the one trenched on the realm of the other. And then those eyes!—large, clear, blue orbs, that brought lovingly back to memory the dreamy waters of the Bay of Naples or the illimitable depths of a cloudless Italian sky. The whole framed, as it were, in gold; not the new staring gold which vexes the eye in the Academy, but the softer, deeper, mellow hue which the breath of Time imparts as he steals silently and reverently through the wondrous treasures of the Medicean Gallery.

Could I get her into the Lawn Tennis Club? Most certainly. Would see about it at once. Oh, no trouble at all, should be most charmed. And we must all have a game to-morrow. They are capital grounds, and as for bad players, Mrs. Tottenham, why no one is particularly good about here, and your husband could always hold his own if I remember right, and I expect Miss Nellie is a great deal better than you imagine. Anyhow we will see.

The lawn tennis business was easily arranged much to Nellie's satisfaction. In fact she told me confidentially that she thought me quite nice, "almost as nice as Mumbo," which didn't sound a very high compliment though I discovered that it was intended for one—Mumbo being an enormous collie with an immense bushy tail and very forbidding appearance who was certainly dearest to her affections after her parents. I felt stupidly pleased at being thought nice and was still more stupidly pleased when the little lady, shaking off all her

shyness, danced on ahead of her parents and took entire possession of me in the most peremptory way as if she had known me for years.

Her father and mother were apparently quite satisfied to follow alone. I think they thought everything she did wonderful and were only too happy if she was amused.

And I didn't object to the arrangement sufficiently to wish it altered.

It didn't take long to show them enough of the sights of the town to weary Mrs. Tottenham out completely, and then by her own special request I took Nellie to see the *Toupie Hollandaise* in the Gold Room of the Kursaal where it serves as a poor sort of substitute for the old roulette-tables, now exiled to Monte Carlo.

Nellie was at first rather contemptuous about "the top" and declared it was only fit for "children." But she gradually got wildly excited over it, and at last I was obliged to try my luck just to please her. Being fortunate enough to win a prize, I became the proud proprietor of a cigarette-holder composed of meerschaum scrapings and worth about a pfennig, which I solemnly presented to her and she received with as much delight as if it had been worth thousands of pounds.

Looking on at this performance we found Gordon Leigh, and I introduced him to Nellie.

She was dignified and a little shy to him at first, but the wonderful charm of his manner soon found its way to her little heart, and in a very short time she was talking and laughing away again as merrily as possible. I must say that he exerted himself to

make her acquaintance as I had never seen him exert himself before, and he talked to the child with an ease and simplicity and kindly gentleness that fairly astonished me—who had stammered and felt like a fool at first and not known what to say and in fact, left the conversation chiefly to Nellie herself. And he who was usually so bitter and cynical about women,—the change was almost magical.

It was kind of him, but I was rather sorry that I had bored him by planting such a small child on him. In short, I was rather glad when we met the Archers and there was no longer any necessity for Gordon Leigh to trouble himself any more about her. Even then I think he would have carried his good nature to the extent of taking charge of Nellie in order that I might talk to Mrs. Archer, but I wasn't as mean as that. No! *I* had brought Nellie out and I felt that I couldn't have the face to coolly shove her off on Gordon Leigh.

Eva and Nellie took to one another at once, and though the child was painfully shy at first, far more shy than she had been to me or Gordon Leigh, from which I guessed that women were probably inclined to snub her, Eva soon contrived to pierce through the barrier of shyness and in a very short time Nellie was hanging on her arm and prattling away as though they had known one another for years.

CHAPTER V.

AN EVENTFUL EVENING.

In the evening when we were sitting in the smoking-room it struck me that I had forgotten to look out for the locket again, and I invoked maledictions on my own stupidity with considerable fervour; though, really, when I came to think of it more calmly, there was no earthly reason for such an amount of heat.

"I like that friend of yours, young Leigh," said Archer, out of whose mouth a huge cloud of smoke was evolving itself in rapid puffs. "I don't take to strange men in a hurry, as you know, but there seems to me something peculiarly nice and attractive about him. Who is he exactly?"

I told him the story of the disagreeable adventure which had introduced me to Gordon Leigh and also that I believed he had made money in America. There was no necessity to say more.

"He is a very good fellow," I concluded, warmly. "Very queer, of course; about as queer at times as they make them, but thoroughly good and as true as steel."

"I was rather amused at one thing I noticed to-day," said Archer, breaking out into a laugh and removing his pipe from his mouth. "It was when we were at the Kursaal. You know those large mirrors in the Gold Room or whatever they call it—where the top is. When we stopped to talk, of course my wife and that little girl began to view themselves quietly and twirl about a little in order to try effects in different attitudes. Well, of course it was very natural, only I was rather amused at little Nellie beginning so young. But I discovered, while watching their antics in the glass, that our friend Mr. Leigh was also taking furtive peeps at himself in a very similar manner with great apparent satisfaction. So I suppose he is rather vain of his slim figure and handsome face, for it is handsome I will admit. But it astonished me for one doesn't get the idea of conceit from his manner."

"Well, after all," I said, thinking he was a little rough on poor Gordon, "I must confess myself to looking into a glass whenever I get the chance to see if my hair and moustache are all right. And I expect most men do. Besides, Leigh is an extraordinarily neat man, very particular about the fit and set of his clothes; in fact, a regular dandy. Well, that sort of man must obviously look at himself much more than the general run or else they couldn't possibly keep as neat as they do."

"Well, I never look in the glass if I can help it," returned Archer, with a broad grin. "But then, you see, it doesn't afford me any pleasure, only shows me up. I dare say it is different with fellows like you and Leigh."

"Talk of the——," I remarked, as the door opened and Leigh appeared suddenly. "Why, man, what is the matter?" For he looked pale and scared.

"There has been a murder committed," he replied hoarsely, throwing himself into a chair as though utterly unstrung.

"A murder!" ejaculated Archer and myself simultaneously, while several other men rose hastily and crowded round to hear. "Where? Who is it?"

"Old Reumont, the banker," replied Leigh, his voice trembling with emotion and his dark eyes glittering with excitement. "You know—where we change our notes. He has been found dead in his room—murdered, stabbed to the heart."

"Good heavens! what a dreadful thing!" cried everybody with ejaculations of horror. "Is there any clue to the assassin?"

"Not that I heard; but there was such an excited crowd round the place that I couldn't get in and what I did hear was simply rumour. He may not be really dead after all."

But he was—poor old man!—foully murdered, too; there was no doubt of that—so we heard from the manager who came in shortly after with horror stamped visibly on his face. The poor, white-headed old man was popular among his fellow-townsmen.

A ghastly story it was.

It amounted to this:—

About one o'clock a tall, dark woman, wearing a high hat, extremely elegantly dressed in black

and carrying herself with great *hauteur*, her face being entirely concealed by a thick, black veil, had entered the office and inquired for the Herr Reumont. The two clerks stated that she spoke German as perfectly as a native, but that they thought she was a foreigner though of what nationality they could form no conjecture. She was so completely enveloped by her veil that they could not see her features; could not even swear to the colour of her hair though to the best of their belief it was black. She had been shown as was usual into the private room, remained there a few minutes, and then had returned quietly without any signs of disorder or excitement and walked away slowly down the Strasse.

An ordinary enough episode in the every-day work of the bank and one which would have made no impression on the minds of the clerks but for after events; except, perhaps, that the younger one acknowledged that he was struck by her appearance and piqued at not being able to catch the slightest glimpse of her face. However, to continue. In about half an hour another visitor came, and the junior clerk on showing him into the private room discovered that it was empty. Concluding that his master had gone out—presumably by the second door leading into the house—he informed the visitor of the circumstance, and the latter refusing to wait went away. The banker did not appear again that day and so it was supposed that he had taken a holiday—a fact rather remarkable in itself, however, for his brother had started by the early train to Frankfurt that morning and the two

brothers did not usually leave the bank at the same time, one generally remaining at home for the sake of business—yet it did not seem to have aroused any uneasiness. The younger Reumont returned about six o'clock, and hearing with natural surprise of his brother's absence, went to the private room to examine the day's accounts. Entering from the door which led into the house, he made a horrible discovery. His brother was lying on the ground behind the desk in a pool of blood, dead. Examination revealed the fact that death was due to an ugly little triangular wound in the side which strongly resembled a bayonet wound. Medical inspection, however, soon discovered unmistakable traces of chloroform; and there appeared little doubt that the poor old man had been stupefied first with the drug and then deliberately stabbed to death.

A thrill of horror ran round the room as the manager concluded his narration. The murder itself was brutal enough but the cold-blooded, deliberate villainy which the last words testified to was unusual even in the black annals of crime.

"What was supposed to be the motive?" I inquired eagerly.

"Robbery, that is quite certain," returned our informant; "the murderess simply pillaged the place. There is so much missing in gold and bank-notes that the firm hardly know the extent of their loss though it must amount to thousands of marks."

"Murderess!" said Archer, inquiringly. "What makes you say that? Is the sex of the criminal so well known?"

"Suspicion," he replied, "naturally falls on the elegantly-dressed and heavily-veiled woman after whose visit the murdered gentleman was discovered to be missing and was never seen alive again."

"Good God!" I cried, utterly horror-struck. "To be sure! How doubly horrible! That a woman could be such a fiend!"

"I can't imagine that any woman would have the brain to plot such a crime or the reckless daring to carry it out," interposed Gordon Leigh, who usually defended women from the attacks of others though he was severe on them himself.

"I can," said Archer, briefly and sternly.

"So can I," I added. "Think, Gordon, so ought you, knowing what you do."

"Yes," he answered, in a reflective tone; "I had forgotten. That puts it in a new light."

"But this woman," struck in a bystander, who had listened with great attention and appeared to weigh every word, "must be a rare cool hand with a most determined will and an unusual amount of pluck; for this is no ordinary crime, mind you. She must have calculated everything to a hair and known how the country lay exactly, moreover. First, that the brother would be away. Secondly, that there was another door to the private room leading to the house. Thirdly, that the desk was so placed that it would hide the body from any one entering from without. Besides, she must have calculated on being shown in *alone*."

"Yes, by George!" I added, startled, "she must have been in there pretty often before to know all that."

"The clerks aver," interposed the manager, "that to their knowledge they had never seen her before. But then her veil was so thick that it was as good as a mask; for they say they could not see her features at all, and she might really have been in frequently in another dress and without her veil."

"She must have been in," remarked the man who had spoken before, "there can be no two opinions on that. The whole thing seems to prove that the murder was elaborately planned. Chance coincidences don't happen with such wonderful accuracy. The only marvel is that a woman could have planned it at all."

"Or, rather, carried it out," said Archer. "Think of the nerve required for that. It is horrible to imagine that such a woman can exist. She must be a perfect fury."

"Perhaps it isn't a woman at all," suggested Gordon Leigh. "How do you know it wasn't a man disguised as a woman?"

"That's an idea!" cried every one in a breath, turning towards him with new interest.

"Yes, that *is* an idea," said Archer, reflectively. "But it would be very unfortunate if it were true, because it would render detection doubly difficult and I expect it will be hard enough as it is. Have they any clue, Steinmetz?"

"None," replied the manager, "as yet, but they hope to find something in the morning when the search and inquiry can be made better."

"Don't forget to suggest Mr. Leigh's theory," added Archer, as Steinmetz withdrew.

"How perfectly horrible it is," I remarked. "How did you hear of it, Gordon?"

"Oh, I was coming back from the Kursaal, and I saw a crowd opposite our porch, and so I naturally went and inquired what was up. Then I found out that the old banker had been murdered."

"Well, I was recommended to leave all my money and valuables there except what I actually wanted," continued Gordon Leigh after a slight pause, "but I am devilish glad I didn't, or this brigand might have pouched the lot. I think my hat-box is perhaps the safest of the two after all."

"Hat-box!" said I, in astonishment. "Surely you don't mean that you keep money in a hat-box?"

"Yes," replied Gordon, laughing. "No one would ever dream of looking for it there."

"Well, no," I admitted, laughing in turn, "I don't suppose they would. But if I kept money in a hat-box I certainly shouldn't talk about it in public."

"I should be sorry to trust to a hat-box," cried Archer, in his boisterous fashion with a loud laugh. "I carry my money in a belt and my wife does the same—that makes matters doubly safe; and as for valuables, you know my wife came to me with what she stood in exactly and we haven't invested as yet very largely, so if any scoundrel pillaged her dressing-bag there wouldn't be much to reward him for his trouble."

"I think you are as rash as Leigh," I urged in an anxious whisper. "These men may be all right, but it is impossible to be sure. What is the good

of trumpeting round the place that Mrs. Archer carries a belt full of money round her waist? It is extremely inconsiderate of you."

"My God!" cried Archer, in alarm, "what a mad fool I am. However, Buchanan, you are a little hasty. After all, we know who most of these men are, or what they are, and there is no ground for the slightest suspicion."

"Yes, but it is a bad habit to shout information like that about. Now I'll tell you what I do and I think the idea is rather neat," I continued, sinking my voice to the lowest possible whisper: "I think you'll admit it beats your hat-box dodge, Gordon. I have a little leather pocket with a hook and fastening with a snap. It acts as a purse in the day, and at night I hook it into the lining of my hat and hang the same up over the door. I'll stake my life that no one would find out that idea."

Both laughed heartily; but Gordon Leigh soon added gravely:

"After all, you know, the result of dodges might merely be that a resolute burglar would wake you and bid you choose between your money and your life—that's all."

"That is what this wretch who murdered the poor old banker would do, I'd lay heavy odds," remarked Archer.

"Isn't it strange, by the bye," I suggested, "how strongly the description tallies with that of our murderess?—the woman on the cliff, you know."

"Yes, the idea occurred to me at once. Ah! that is another mystery. I wonder if it will ever be cleared up?"

"Jack thinks it will," said Gordon Leigh, with a slight smile which I well understood.

"Does he? Have you ever seen any one like the woman, Jack?"

"Yes—that is, I mean, no!"

"Lucid, upon my word."

"I mean that I haven't."

"Ah, and why did you say you had?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. I suppose it is like this: the description applies to almost any tall, dark woman—you see it tallies with this wretch of to-day."

Is there any magnetism in the air which causes the same thought to occur to two people at once simply because it has occurred to one of them? Frequently I have felt that ideas of mine were subtly communicated to people to whom I was talking, who would never have thought of them in any ordinary course of things and who were perhaps the very last people I should have desired them to occur to. So now the more I floundered about trying to divert Archer on to some ordinary trail, the more certain did I become that he had guessed what was really passing in my mind and resented it.

"It is a dangerous game," he said, briefly and sternly looking me full in the face, "playing the private detective unless you have something very sound to go on. Men are apt to get hold of strange fancies and burn their fingers over it. I should advise you not to be rash or fanciful. Don't you agree with me, Leigh?"

"Yes," returned Gordon Leigh softly, so softly

as to be almost inaudible, "that is, unless one has something ve—ry sound to go on."

Archer looked at him fixedly, then at me, then opened his lips as though to speak, checked himself abruptly and fixed his eyes on Leigh again sternly, who obviously somewhat disconcerted at this rudeness set to work to twirl a cigarette.

"Humph!" said Archer, suddenly rising, "I shall go to bed." And the door closed on his stalwart figure.

"Old chap," said Gordon Leigh, looking at me curiously with a laugh in his eyes, "you nearly put your foot in it that time."

"What *do* you mean?" I replied irritably.

But Gordon Leigh declined to say any more. His cigarette—absurd little whiff that it was—was now completed, and he was soon puffing out tiny rings of faint blue smoke with the utmost zest. He shook his head at me in a warning way once or twice, but would not continue the subject.

That was the worst of Gordon Leigh: he never could be serious for very long, however serious the subject might really be.

I went to bed at last very tired with the amount of exertion I had gone through in the day, and fell asleep at once.

* * * *

Suddenly, however, a shrill scream of terror rang through my ears loud enough to rouse the dead, and I awoke cold and shivering, with a creepy feeling in my limbs, to find Eva Archer's face bending over me and her large, dark eyes with a

lurid, cruel, unnatural glitter in them peering into mine. I started away with a gasping cry as though I had seen a spectre.

But the face had vanished almost as I moved.

I started up with an exclamation of surprise. There was nothing in the room, nothing resembling a human face or form.

I sprang out of bed and rushed eagerly to the door.

It was locked as usual on the inside. The moon shone brilliantly in through the window and half-drawn blind and filled the room with strange, weird shadows. But I could see that there was nobody in the room and there was no place where a dog could have hidden itself much less a human being, except under the bed. The bed itself stood out straight from the wall and was of the usual German box-type. It was really utterly preposterous to imagine that any woman could have darted under it so quickly that her flight wouldn't be perceived as I shot up in the bed and of all women the tall Amazonian Eva Archer seemed least likely to effect such a rapid disappearance. Still I lighted a candle and looked under the bed carefully, not that I expected to find anything, but to make sure that there was nothing. I even crawled under it on my hands and knees and examined closely to the very wall, so determined was I to find out if any trick had been played on me. At last after bumping my head violently several times against the wall and bottom of the bed I emerged hot, dusty, and angry. My first impulse was to look at the door again. It was still locked on the inside, and so it

seemed a physical impossibility that any one should have gone out of my room through that road.

There was the window, of course, and there was no obstacle to prevent any one making an exit that way. But I am perfectly certain that whoever attempted it, unless possessed of wings, would not have got farther than the courtyard beneath until his mutilated body was discovered stretched on the flags in the morning.

It was evidently only a dream and about Eva. But what a singularly vivid dream it must have been to have left such an impression on my mind as to deceive my waking faculties for a few minutes even. I could have sworn I had seen her face with the dark, lustrous eyes looking at me as through a mist, and yet so near and with such life-like reality that I never doubted for an instant but that she was in the room. And yet the idea ought never to have entered my head. There had never been anything in her conduct which should lead me to suppose that she would have been guilty of such an indiscretion. She had always seemed devoted to her husband and had regarded me with favour chiefly, no doubt, because he appeared to like me. Moreover, supposing she was actually there, how did she get out again and then lock that door on the inside? If she had jumped through the window, Heaven help her! But then I must have heard the shriek which would have accompanied her fall, and the awful blood-curdling moans that would have told of the broken, mangled body and crushed shattered limbs. There was not a sound in the air. I went to the open window and looked out into the

courtyard. There was no dark shadow on the pavement, no sound disturbed the dead, solemn stillness of a continental night. I *must* have been dreaming. And yet why should I dream of *her?*

Then suddenly I remembered that I had had a very similar dream only not so complete a few nights ago—in fact, when I came to think of it, the night after I had first seen Eva Archer. Odd, that. It almost seemed as if she had exercised some peculiar effect on me. Was it possible that there could be any magnetic sympathy between us that should lead me to conjure up her figure in my dreams. Certainly I had been very much attracted by her beauty and had felt quite a thrill run through me whenever I gazed into the fathomless depths of her dark, lustrous eyes; but still it struck me that it was highly improbable that I could be *en rapport* with a woman about whom I knew so extremely little—for after all I had really seen very little of her and she had had no eyes for me except as far as mere politeness went. Her thoughts were too evidently fixed on her husband entirely. Besides, she hadn't really appeared at all in the first dream as far as I could remember. And then I had been just as much if not considerably more attracted by the little Nellie. I ought really to have dreamt about her, and it occurred to me that I wouldn't have minded that very much. No, it was only a dream, a chance coincidence! curious no doubt, but really commonplace enough. But as for any supernatural rubbish, pooh! nonsense! absurd!

No, it was utterly impossible. And yet I am no dreamer and this dream was so singularly vivid.

In fact I may as well confess at once that half the reason why I sat up shivering and moralising in this feeble way was that I did half believe that there was something out of the ordinary run connected with this vision and was secretly afraid to put out the candle and run the chance of a repetition.

At last I determined not to go to sleep again, but to simply lie down quietly on the bed and wait thus till morning. I should have plenty to think about I knew, and that and the lighted candle combined ought to keep me sufficiently awake to preclude all chance of any more dreams—if dreams they were.

I at once put the idea in action got into my dressing-gown and was soon stretched out comfortably on the bed feeling wide awake enough to defy the influence of Morpheus entirely.

Have you ever tried lying awake in this way? If so I am sure you will agree with me that it is the most aggravating thing one can possibly do.

First of all, there was the dead, solemn stillness of the night itself which seemed to string every nerve of hearing to the utmost tension. The result of this preternatural acuteness of the ears was that every sound seemed endowed with tenfold loudness, and that the slightest rustle the creaking of a chair the movement of insects on the windows or in the walls which would be all unnoticed in the day, assumed formidable volume and excited the strangest thoughts in my brain which would never have

occurred to me at any other time. Moreover, the human mind is certainly not at its best in the dead darkness which shrouds the world at this hour. The spirit loses half its sovereignty, overmastered by the weakness of the body. I have known brave men who had faced death in the most hideous form unterrified, and who yet frankly confessed that nothing made them feel more uncomfortable than to hear at night a sound which they could not account for. It is partly due, no doubt, to the foolish habit of inculcating a belief in ghosts and evil spirits and other night-wanderers in the minds of young children which is so commonly done in the nursery and which few are able to shake off entirely; and it is partly due, no doubt, to the feeling that however ridiculous the belief in supernatural appearances may be, still they have never been actually disproved and if they do occur at all they are more likely to occur in the night than at any other time. Every man is really *afraid* of ghosts. When any one denies this, he simply means that he does not believe that there are such beings or that if he found himself in circumstances which appeared to be beyond the ordinary laws of nature, he would not be seized with a panic terror but would act like an intelligent creature—that is all. But to imagine that any man finding himself face to face with a being whose nature, power, and intentions are altogether beyond his ken, would not feel a thrill of terror at the infinite possibility thus opened before him, is as good as saying that his mind was so brutally stupid that he was unable to realize the true nature of his position. No! the

difference between a brave man and a coward is that the former conquers his terror the latter is carried away by it.

This may explain how it was that five minutes after I had laid myself on the bed I found myself listening, listening, positively straining every muscle in the vain effort to catch some fancied sound. Hark! There was no mistake. I distinctly heard "pat, pat, pat," in the room accompanied by a dull "thump, thump." I listened more attentively till my whole body vibrated with nervous excitement.

Yes, there it was again louder than ever but irregular and intermittent in sound. It seemed much nearer than before. I could have sworn that it was within a foot of me and yet I saw nothing. Could it really be that I was subject to a supernatural manifestation and that Eva's spirit was addressing me! I began to feel very uncomfortable. This was a great deal worse than any amount of dreams.

Then suddenly I traced the sound to the right place. It was the tumultuous beating of my own heart which magnified enormously by the attitude I was lying in and the utter absence of ordinary sounds had excited my alarm; while the nervous trembling of my limbs under the influence of this emotion had communicated a vibration to the bed and no doubt in that way originated the "pat, pat," that I have mentioned.

What an idiot I had been!

With a sigh of relief I determined not to listen any more. What a pretty child that little Nellie

was. I never saw such lovely eyes before except of course, Eva's. But then Eva's are dark and luminous while this little child seemed as though she had gazed so long into the clear blue abysses of the heavens that she had retained the reflection for ever imprisoned in her beautiful orbs. I wonder I never noticed her when I was down there before. I suppose she must have been in the nursery for it was at least five years ago. I seem to remember some children romping about the garden and coming down to dessert occasionally. I will ask Tottenham about it to-morrow.

I wonder whether it would be a good idea to put that candle out. It does not give any light worth speaking of, and I expect it will go out soon of its own accord, and then there will be an awful smell. Good gracious !—what's that ?—oh, only the clock ! one !—two !—three !—four ! Only two hours more, thank Heaven !

Let me see, what was I thinking about ? A long pause in the current of thought ensued during which I racked my brains in vain to recover the broken thread.

I wonder whether Eva can play tennis ? How splendid she would look at it ! If one could only get her and her husband to see that they cut themselves out of no end of fun by their folly in spooning so violently ! I wonder whether that little Nellie is thinking of me now. Probably fast asleep with the pert little turned-up nose buried in her pillow and thinking about nothing at all. Why didn't I inquire when they were going to breakfast ?—idiot that I am. Well, they are sure

to be down at the springs. Oh, those lovely blue eyes——

* * * *

Blue eyes did you say? There's Eva, and there's Nellie. That's plain enough; but their eyes seem to have got mixed somehow. I can't tell which is which; can you? But you needn't thump me so hard and bang away as though you wanted to wake the dead! O—o—o—oh—m—m! ye—es! yaw—aw—m! thump, thump! Why good gracious it is six o'clock, and that is the *mädchen* banging at the door.

I suppose I went to sleep again after all.

CHAPTER VI.

LADY MABEL TALKS.

It had become a regular thing that Lady Mabel Mornington and I drank the waters together at six in the morning and then promenaded about the avenues till breakfast-time. Sometimes she brought her parents down too, and she always brought her little girl, a tiny golden-haired cherub of about eight years old the exact image of her beautiful mamma.

This morning, however, I determined to break through the rule though the resolve I knew was little short of a revolution. But really I ought to look after the Tottenhams. It was their first morning and they had promised to be down. In fact Mrs. Tottenham must come and drink the water as she was under treatment.

But when I saw Lady Mabel's graceful figure sailing up the lime walk as usual with her little girl dancing at her side, I felt my resolutions vanishing into empty air. She looked lovelier than ever in her white frock which fitted her as other women's dresses never fitted them. And then though it was

made of plain white cotton, it was white cotton so glorified and transfigured with delicate open work and soft rich lace that it was really a marvel of art such as only an artist could turn out; while everything that she had on was so neat, so spotlessly pure and clean, that it was a treat to see her. If there is a thing I hate it is to see a woman with dirty lace or soiled white things of any kind. Lady Mabel always looked as though her things had just come from the bleaching ground and it is impossible to give her higher praise than that.

Several men, I noticed made towards her but she bowed in her curt, unceremonious way and passed on. She had no idea of being appropriated. Catching hold of the tiny child's hand she stood just outside the crowd of water-drinkers and peered round heedless and probably disdainful of the admiration she still provoked, well-known as her handsome face must be by now. She didn't see me at first when I moved towards her, but when she did her face lightened up so unmistakably with pleasure that I felt a slight twinge of remorse at my intended desertion of her.

We strolled round to perform the usual ceremony of drinking the waters though in our case it was a mere ceremony, for she was a strong, healthy woman with a fine constitution, and I had never known what it was to have an illness in my life.

"I had such a singular dream last night," I observed, after discussing a number of subjects.

"Oh, do tell me about it. Was it very dreadful? I do like dreams and I believe in them firmly."

I told her all about the dream, adding that the only reason why I supposed it to be a dream was because there seemed to be no other possible explanation. She listened with a most serious look in her great violet eyes, and her scarlet lips slightly apart disclosing two rows of pearly teeth.

"Well, now," I concluded, "what do you make of that?"

"It is a warning," she said, in an awestruck voice, "a warning to beware of that woman. I never liked her look from the first."

I am afraid I only stared at her for a few seconds in bewilderment, and with a strong inclination to laugh. Here was a mountain of interpretation out of such a molehill of a dream.

"Yes," continued the beautiful lips solemnly, "these dreams are not sent to us for nothing. Depend upon it some great misfortune is impending, in which this woman with her dark Jewish evil-looking face will have a share if indeed she is not the cause."

This I felt was too absurd. I could understand that the acknowledged beauty of the place might feel bitter towards a rival beauty especially when of such a different type. But envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, even when based on jealousy, must have some limit.

"I can assure you," I said, very seriously in turn, "that Mrs. Archer is a great friend of mine and is really extremely nice and gentle, and anything but malicious or dangerous."

"Oh, I know you think so," cried Lady Mabel wildly, with a toss of her head and her lips quivering,

"of course *you* would think so. And no doubt you think that *I* am malicious and dangerous, and everything that is horrid. I really wonder that you care to sp—speak to—to—m—me at all." And for the second time in our acquaintance this usually so haughty and dignified a dame positively whimpered with rage.

Bitterly regretting that I had said anything to her on the subject, I repaired my error as well as I could, soothed her and metaphorically stroked down the ruffled fur, and even threw Eva Archer entirely overboard, mean as it may appear, with the result that the storm-clouds cleared away, the tears did not flow, and the injured pout on those beautiful lips ripened at last into an irrepressible smile, and then all was sunshine, laughter, and contrite repentance.

What a strange mass of contradictions she was, and yet with all her passionate rudeness I was sure that she really liked and respected me. Certainly if she didn't she would never have abased herself to the dust as she did now in her remorse and shame.

"And now tell me about this dreadful murder," she said, recovering herself a little.

"How did you hear of it?" I inquired surprised, for I didn't think that the news could have got so early to the Promenade where the Hawthornes were staying.

"My maid told me, if you will know," she replied with a pout and a little confusion. "You really shouldn't ask such questions. How do you suppose we ladies hear most things? Think of the time

it takes us to dress, and who ever heard of two women being in the same room together for any length of time and not talking. Of course we talk, and that is how I hear the news. Sometimes I think I hear a good deal more than the real news."

"You mean that your Abigail exaggerates."

"Yes, most decidedly. But what does it matter. Some one tells me the true version later on and that is fresh news. So you see it is really an advantage that she does exaggerate a little."

"I see. I must confess, however, that that idea wouldn't have occurred to me, but you put it so clearly."

"Of course it wouldn't. But then you are a man."

"Well?"

"Why of course it wouldn't strike a man. You men take everything so dreadfully seriously. Now there is my papa. I told him yesterday a piece of news I had heard, and I expect I must have told it him all wrong, for though it seemed to me a very ordinary and not particularly interesting piece of intelligence—something about some silly revolution in some out-of-the-way place—he got in a wild state of excitement and sent me flying off to the Kursaal to read all the German papers, if you please, and find out the correct story."

"That was rather a large order."

"I should think so; but I thought papa was going to have a fit and so I flew off at once. But really I don't think I should have come back much the wiser but for your Mr. Gordon Leigh who was

prowling about there and whom I impressed at once. That man hates me, I know," she broke off abruptly.

"Really, I think it is mainly your fancy."

"No, I saw it then. I asked him some question and he looked at me with those fierce, cruel eyes of his as though he would like to kill me. I declare I felt quite frightened. I am sure the creature would have told me to go to an unmentionable place if he had dared."

"Come, come, Lady Mabel, give the man his due. He is no coward, and it is not cowardice to refrain from insulting a lady."

"No," she replied a little ashamed; "you are right, and I apologise to him. And he certainly did help me. So it is rather ungrateful. And if he doesn't like me, really I haven't given him any cause to."

Lady Mabel had evidently entirely forgotten the murder.

"Well, and how did it end?"

"Oh, I took him home to talk to papa. I don't think really that he knew anything more about it than I did at first, but he knew where to look in the papers and reads German quicker than I do; anyhow I left him talking to mama and papa and when I came back it had all blown over. I believe all the excitement originated in the fact that this revolution, or whatever it was, had something to do with some tiresome treaty which was made when papa's party were last in power."

"Did you say you took Leigh home?" I inquired, astounded.

"Yes."

"But I thought you disliked him so."

"Oh, yes," said Lady Mabel very indifferently; "but I thought he would do to talk to papa, and papa is so dreadfully tiresome when he gets on politics."

It occurred to me now with startling suddenness that I had never fully realized the immensity of the pride of these Hawthornes before. Lady Mabel didn't really regard Gordon Leigh as an equal who was to be treated by ordinary rules of etiquette. She had simply ordered him in to amuse her father, —that was clearly her idea; a refusal on his part would have astonished her excessively, and it would certainly never strike her that he might regard her action as a personal advance towards friendship. The cool insolence of her view of the case was overwhelming, especially as the disagreeable notion at once arose that probably she looked on *me* in much the same light as my friend.

"What are you thinking about?" she inquired; "you are getting almost as rude as I am."

All the pleasure, however, seemed to be taken out of our promenade. The idea that perhaps I was looked on as a person who "would do to talk to" was so humiliating that I became more and more *distrait,* more anxious that the Tottenhams would come in order that I might have a good excuse for leaving her.

"Why do you keep on glaring round in that wild way?" she remarked again in a short time; "and why don't you pay any attention to what I say? It is not civil, to put it mildly. I can tell

you what it is, I won't stand this much longer; of course you have a perfect right to do what you like, but I can assure you that I am not going to waste the brillance of my conversation on a man who has twice agreed with me that old Lady Termoyle is the exact image of her daughter when we both know perfectly well that she hasn't got one and never had one."

Certainly there was nothing in her conduct which should lead me to believe the disagreeable idea I had conjured up. Besides, it was absurd, and the cases entirely different. Gordon Leigh, good fellow as he was, was no doubt to some extent an adventurer, but a Buchanan of Liviotdale was surely a match for a Hawthorne any day, in spite of the latter's peerage of George III.'s creation for not very reputable services.

Anyhow I determined to test the haughty dame and drop her at once if she failed at the ordeal.

"To tell the truth," I said, "my conscience has been smiting me frightfully, and I am afraid that has made me grossly inattentive and rude. But you are too good-natured not to forgive."

"I am not so sure about that," she replied, the clouds clearing away from her lovely brow and a soft smile playing over her lips. I think if she had always looked like that I might almost have fallen in love with her, but I hated her fits of temper. "If I do forgive you it will simply be on condition that you tell me what it is your conscience is worrying you about. It is such a rich and gloriously new idea for a man to have a conscience that I feel quite interested."

I told her about the Tottenhams and offered to introduce her.

"Yes, that will be a good idea, and I might take Mr. Tottenham off, you know." This was said with a very arch look which I didn't at all understand; but I considered that so far she had come out of the trial well. Evidently her disdainful pride did not extend to *all* my friends.

"Well, you can certainly try," I replied, laughing; for I didn't consider him a very promising subject for a flirtation.

"And is Mrs. Tottenham so very fascinating?" she continued with a very odd look.

"She is extremely kind and good-natured. I like her immensely," I replied heartily.

"Is she very beautiful? All Devonshire women are, I have heard."

"I don't know about that, exactly," I replied, dubiously, it was such an extraordinary question. "I never thought of her in that light. I suppose she is to a matured taste, but I must confess that I should have preferred her more about twenty years ago."

She shot at me a puzzled glance of inquiry.

"Twenty years ago!" she repeated shrilly, "why how old is the woman now?"

"About fifty, I should think. At least, I know that Jack Tottenham, the eldest son, must be twenty-five."

She burst out laughing.

"Fifty! Good gracious. Why, I thought she was a young and lovely female from the way you have been going on. What a very extraordinary

person you are. Now listen to me," she continued, gravely and rather contemptuously; "I know you are rather a quixotic young man at times and behave in a way which might be dangerous if you were blessed with designing relations; but if you think you are going to bamboozle me into the belief that all this extraordinary conduct springs from anxiety as to the welfare of an excellent matron who is old enough to be your mother, why I am sorry for you. It won't do, Mr. Buchanan; it won't do. You are keeping something back and I insist on acting as your father confessor. By the bye, how old is this little girl you talk of?"

"About fourteen, I should say." I don't exactly know why I understated her age but it slipped out.

"What makes you think she is fourteen? Now, be careful, sir, as the judge said to Mr. Winkle."

"She wears her hair down her back and her dresses don't reach the top of her boots."

"Yes, certainly that looks like the nursery," she replied reflectively with a strange air—I should almost have said of relief if the question had mattered to her in the slightest. "Are you sure," she continued, "that there isn't any friend or relation with them who has fascinated your too susceptible heart? I suppose, however, you would not say so if there were."

"There is a large overfed dog with them, I must admit," nearly shouting at the remembrance of the way in which he had polished off an enormous platter of bones; "but I don't know whether he is a friend or a relation. Probably the former. Any-

how, I can assure you on my conscience that I am not in love with him; and I should be very sorry to have to feed him by contract."

"Now you are laughing at me," she cried angrily and her beautiful face grew harsh and stern as I hated to see it; and the strange idea crossed my mind that if I could have imagined that she could possibly have been in love with me an easy explanation would be found for these unaccountable fits of temper.

"On the contrary, I am laughing at the thought of Steinmetz's face when he saw this 'friend or relation's' performances in the eating department. I have not the slightest doubt that the worthy German was thanking Providence that the creature did not come to the ordinary *table d'hôte*."

"Ah, well," she said, compressing her lips a little and nodding her head, "we shall see. I shall keep my eyes open, at all events. Now I must go. There's my maternal parent throwing out signals. She is bored to death I expect with papa, so I must go and relieve guard. Besides, I know you are dying to go to your friends."

"Would you care to play tennis this afternoon?" I inquired, determined to see what she would do and half dreading that her insane pride would make her scorn the idea of playing with *my* friends. "We are all going to play, including the dog, no doubt. I don't the least bit know how any of them can perform, but if you don't mind risking the chance of being bored. And you might bring Bella; the two children might suit one another."

Bella was her own little girl. "See what it is to

have a reputation for good-nature," she replied smiling satirically. "All right, I'll come; and mind, I intend to flirt with Mr. Tottenham."

"I don't think you'll get far enough to disturb Mrs. T's peace of mind very much," I thought as she joined Lady Hawthorne. "What a pity she is allowed to run wild. A little judicious training would have been the making of her. How wonderfully fascinating she can be when she likes, and how seldom she does like!" Yet this was ungrateful, for she was usually nice to me, and she had come out of the trial like a true woman, to my unfeigned delight.

I hastened rapidly down the lime-walk and soon saw the Tottenhams in the distance.

Yes, there they were—the whole family. Nellie with her tiny hand twisted in Mumbo's enormous collar was a little in advance of her father and mother, and she was chattering away with the greatest glee.

We exchanged greetings in the usual fashion. Yes, they had slept well. Mrs. Tottenham felt better already. They liked Homburg amazingly. They thought the hotel excellent. They did not at all approve of the German troops who had been parading about the town at a very early hour making an immense noise with their drums.

By this time we had reached the other end of the lime-walk where Mrs. Tottenham intended to pour a libation to Æsculapius in the orthodox fashion.

"Would you like to come into the conservatories, while mama drinks the waters?" I suggested to Nellie with a general impression that I felt very

odd almost nervous if one could imagine the idea possible.

Nellie looked at her mama who nodded, apparently much pleased.

"Certainly, Mr. Buchanan; it will be very good of you if you don't mind being pestered by a child." And so we strolled off.

CHAPTER VII.

"MUMBO SHAKES A PAW."

NELLIE did not at all like her mama's last remark.

"It is absurd," she observed gravely to me, "to call me a child now. Don't you think so?"

But Nellie was far too happy a creature for even. this terrible insult to her dignity to trouble her long

"I wonder," she said, raising her blue eyes to my face with a look of anxiety in them—she was not yet "grown up" enough to hide her feelings—"whether you remembered about the tennis for to-day?"

"Yes," I hastened to assure her; "I have got a court for three hours, so you can play as long as you like."

"And who is going to play?"

"Well, there will be you and I and your father and—does Mrs. Tottenham play?"

"No, of course not; she will look on"

"Then I have asked Lady Mabel Mornington; she's very nice, I think you will like her."

"Do you like her very much?"

"Yes, she is one of my oldest and dearest friends."

"Is she very, very old?"

"Oh no, quite a young woman."

"Ah!" replied Nellie, with an air of disappointment.

"Yes, and she is very beautiful."

"I expect she is really horrid and I shan't like her at all." This was said quite sharply.

"Perhaps you will like her little girl?"

"What! has she a little girl? She *must* be very old."

"It is quite a *little* girl, you know; only eight years old. I hope you will be great friends."

"Oh *dear* no! I can't *bear* children, they are *dreadfully* in the way. They always spoil everything."

I didn't laugh, but I don't exactly know how I managed not to.

"I do hope you've got some men," she continued.

"Yes, a very nice boy called Wing—George Wing."

"I don't like boys, they are so tiresome and stupid."

"But this boy is over twenty-one and he is in the Enniskillings."

"O—oh, I should call him a man," and the blue eyes opened in astonishment.

"So much the better. So there are three men, your father myself and Wing. I will get another girl and then we can change about every game."

"That will be nice. Do you know I made certain you would forget?"

I felt very much wounded by this uncalled-for suspicion.

"Yes," she continued shaking back the feathery fringe that hung like a cloud over her forehead; "and I was so excited about it that I could not go to sleep for a long time. And when I did, I dreamt that you and Mumbo were playing tennis and I was the ball. It felt so odd."

"It must have been. How did Mumbo manage his racquet? Did he hold it in his mouth or his paw, or was it tied on to his tail?"

"I don't remember. But you were, oh, so cross."

"What was I cross about?"

"Oh, I don't know. You didn't say. But you were so, so cross. Isn't this pretty?"

"Beautiful!" I replied vaguely.

"Now you haven't even looked at it; you are looking at me. Look at *it*," she commanded peremptorily.

I obeyed; transferred my gaze for the space of a flash of lightning to the object of her admiration—a dishevelled looking plant of some kind or other,—and then restored them to the contemplation of the animated little face before me.

"Very pretty indeed," I said, referring to the face.

"I don't believe you even looked at it. You were staring at me all the time. Is anything wrong with my hair?"

"No, it looks all right."

"Have I got a smut on my nose?"

"No," I replied scrutinising the impudent little curled-up feature more closely.

"Is my frock torn?" This with a keen glance of anxious inquiry over her frock as though the event was by no means unlikely.

"No, I don't think so," I replied cautiously.

"No, it isn't!" she cried triumphantly, after a close examination. "Now tell me, why did you stare so?"

"I thought it was only polite," I remarked shamelessly, "to look at a person who is speaking to me."

"Oh, that was it. I suppose that is why people always stare so when they are talking to me. I think it is a very uncomfortable rule."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like staring into people's eyes. It makes me hot and red and always ends in my dropping mine, which I suppose is very rude."

"It does not so much matter about ladies," I suggested gently, for I didn't like the notion of Nellie going about trying to stare all the men out of countenance under the impression that it was good manners, "the rule only applies to men."

"Oh, I am very glad of that," she returned with undisguised pleasure. "I wish it did not apply to them even."

Evidently I must be contented with looking at her furtively; as for instance now, when she is admiring that fern and standing with her profile towards me. What a lovely child she is! She ought to grow up into an extremely handsome woman in a few years. I never saw such beautiful hair. It seems to flow in ripples and waves of gold over her shoulders, descending beyond her waist.

Suddenly I was conscious that she was speaking to me.

"Very pretty indeed," I answered at random.

"Now you know you weren't listening," she answered petulantly with an indignant flash of her eyes. "I asked you what the time was, and you answer 'very pretty indeed.' I call it very rude."

"I am very sorry. I beg your pardon," I said humbly.

"Well, I will forgive you this time; but you must promise never to do it again," she replied relenting a little.

"I promise," I assured her eagerly.

"Do you know,"—coming near me and looking up rather shyly but dropping her eyes as soon as they met mine—"Mama says that if a person does not listen to another person when they are talking to them, the person——"

"Which person?" I could not help inquiring wickedly.

"The person who doesn't listen to the other person, doesn't do it because the person bores them or because they——"

"Who are *they?* Do you mean both persons or one? These persons are getting rather mixed."

"Yes, they are confusing," she admitted; "they seem to run away with one, they were all right at first. I mean, supposing you don't listen to mama when she speaks to you it is either because she bores you or you have been badly brought up."

"Then if I don't listen to you it is either because you bore me or I have been badly brought up?"

"Yes; so mama says."

"And of course mama must be right?"

"Oh yes"—this with a slight air of surprise at the question—"of *course*."

"Then I am afraid I must have been very badly brought up, Miss Tottenham."

"Oh, I am so sorry," murmured Miss Tottenham looking the picture of commiseration. "I mean I am so glad I don't bore you but I am so sorry for you. It must be dreadful for you. My mama has told me often and often how thankful I should be that I have been well brought up."

"Then you have been well brought up?"

"Oh yes," with the utmost *naïveté*, "my mama brought *me* up."

"I see."

"But I am so sorry for you. It must be dreadful for you; and yet you don't seem very unhappy."

"No, I try to bear up against it; it is a poor heart that never rejoices. By the way," a bright idea occurring to me, "don't you think that you might be able to help me a little as you have been so well brought up? You might take me in hand, you know and tell me when I go wrong and set me right generally. It would be only kind."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly," replied Nellie the rich blood mantling on her soft cheek. "It would be too rude. You are so much older than me."

"Yes, but I have been so badly brought up you know," I argued.

"That makes a difference certainly," she admitted reflectively.

"If you wouldn't mind I should be so much obliged," I pleaded most impressively.

"Oh, I don't mind. It will be great fun," she replied laughing, but the colour still suffused her

face and she turned her head away to hide her blushes. I felt irresistibly inclined to laugh. What a sweet *naïve* innocent little thing! But I controlled my feelings however, fortunately, for I am sure that such an exhibition would have ended our friendship then and for ever. The idea that any one could be laughing at her would have been an awful shock to this dignified little lady.

By the time we had done the round of the conservatories and got back to the hotel we had become great friends.

She had prattled away continuously, and confided to me all sorts of secrets. Among other things she had let out that she still adored dolls and sometimes played with them in her own room though she was much ashamed of being so childish. She informed me that she was very fond of dancing *now*, but that when she was seven years old she had had so much of it that she was quite tired of it and gave it up entirely. Since then she had tried a number of other things at different times and had now taken up dancing again and rather liked it. She had not had much lately—that I expect was strictly true—and she supposed she would go to the Kursaal dances—that I doubted very much from what I knew of Mrs. Tottenham. She even forgave my bad bringing up sufficiently to permit me to call her "Nellie," and in return I begged her to call me "Jack," which she graciously acceded to.

She insisted on my shaking a paw with Mumbo which he very unwillingly submitted to under grave protest and I executed with proper solemnity. Wag his tail at me, however, he positively refused to

do in spite of any amount of ordering and coaxing; and so at last his mistress took hold of the reluctant tail and wagged it violently for him.

The tennis in the afternoon went off very well. Lady Mabel put on her most smiling appearance and never once attempted to snap any one up. Nellie and young Wing got on capitally, almost too well I thought; it would be a pity if she were to develop into a little flirt. Old Tottenham ran about with the greatest fury till his red face glowed like the setting sun and he was obliged to adjourn breathlessly to imbibe huge draughts of the cool sparkling water from the shady Ludwig well. Mrs. Tottenham escorted by Gordon Leigh who was making heavy running in that quarter looked on and laughed at our antics, and even the Archers came down for a short time to join in the fun.

How we laughed and ran about in the broiling sun. How we shrieked for balls at the red-capped boys in Anglo-German and they screamed back in *patois!* How Mumbo sat up with his tongue lolling out of his mouth and looked on with the greatest dignity until at last a random shot bowled him completely over and reduced him to humiliation! How we all drank quarts of Ludwig in the intervals of the game!

Then at last worn out we lay down in the shade of the trees, and Lady Mabel came out in a new character and told us story after story till we shrieked with laughter, and till she stirred up the spirit of emulation in Gordon Leigh, and he in turn spun some tremendous yarns without moving a muscle.

All this and a great deal more I must leave you to imagine.

And then how, when the sun rode low in the western heaven and the long shadows stole silently across the smooth lawn of the tennis ground we sauntered lazily up the hill just in time to secure places at the *table d'hote* of the Victoria.

But why, when at the close of the evening I escorted Lady Mabel to her father's house in the Promenade, did she look at me with such an anxious, wistful look as I said good-bye at the door?

It haunted me that night till I fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LITTLE SPITFIRE.

WHATEVER may have been the idea which had flashed across Archer's brain on the night of the murder he made no further reference to it and I gathered from his manner that he had dismissed it entirely.

The locket much to my annoyance only occurred to me at odd times such as when I was going to bed when there was no possible means of taking any measures; and though I made heroic resolutions not to forget about it, it always seemed to slip my memory when I was actually in Eva's presence.

No clue was found to the murder.

It was laid of course to the charge of the tall woman dressed in black, and nothing short of a revelation from Heaven would have convinced the Homburg world of her innocence. But for all that no trace of her could be found. She had vanished as completely as if she had taken to her the wings of the morning. The oddest part of the thing was that she appeared to have been seen by no one. Not a single person remembered noticing a tall

woman in black with a thick black veil over her face on that particular morning. And yet dozens of people must have been passing at the time.

My own private impression was that this was only another proof of the woman's cool almost insolent daring and foresight. People don't as a rule notice strangers very much in a crowd and a tall woman is far less conspicuous among a number of other women than when walking alone. Acting on this idea, she had selected as the time for her appearance and disappearance the hour when the street was crowded with people hurrying up from the tennis-ground tired out and bent solely on lunch, among whom she no doubt passed entirely unremarked and was easily able to remove the tell-tale veil without attracting any attention.

In fact why should passers-by consider it a thing of any note for a lady to take off her veil in the street?

Again, why should any one specially remember a lady in black among the numerous ladies dressed in every colour?

On propounding this theory to Gordon Leigh he agreed with me, but after a few minutes' silence added:

"But you see, of course, my dear fellow, that if you are right, the reason why the woman's face attracted no attention was because it was well-known. A strange woman walking alone with the air and manner described by the clerks and dressed in black too—for a tall woman in black is really so very conspicuous in spite of what most women think—of course she must have been remembered

by somebody unless her face was so well-known that it didn't occur to any one to think of her."

"Well, but if that is so," I answered slowly, "that would completely upset your notion that the woman was a man in disguise."

"Yes," he replied smiling; "but every one scorns that, you know. The clerks both laughed at the idea and declared that there was nothing at all masculine about her. Besides, think what gigantic waists you or I or the average man would have in woman's clothes—and I am not fat I am sure—whereas this woman appears to have had an unusually tiny one."

"I know," I returned reluctantly convinced against my will, "but it is such a horrible idea that this woman may be actually stalking red-handed among us planning Heaven knows what new villainy and laughing to scorn our attempts to break through her impenetrable veil of secrecy."

"Yes; and what makes matters worse is that for all we know we may be in daily intercourse with her, may actually aid her in her war against society, may treat her as our dearest friend. Horrible to think of, isn't it?" he concluded with a peal of mocking laughter.

"For Heaven's sake don't laugh like that. It's exactly like Mephistopheles in the cathedral. And it *is* really horrible to think of. I swear I would cut the place at once if it wasn't for—er—er—the —er—Hawthornes."

"Fortunately, however, we are quite sure of all *our* friends, aren't we?" he said fixing his eyes on me with a very peculiar inquiring glance.

"Yes, quite sure; of course, quite sure!"

But why did my thoughts almost involuntarily recur to Mrs. Archer.

"Ah!"

His brilliant eyes seemed to look me through and through and pierce to my very soul. Do what I would I couldn't meet his glance, and I knew as well as if he had told me that he knew why I hesitated in my answer.

And yet Heaven knows there was no reason why I should.

However there was no further advance.

The banker had been murdered and the bank robbed pretty heavily,—that was very clear. That the murder had been done by the woman in black there appeared to be almost as little doubt. But as to laying hands on the murderess, that was quite a different question.

The German police professed much—just as our English police do. Large rewards were offered. I believe that detectives were put on the track if the word is applicable where there is no track, and I have no doubt worked as detectives generally do work.

But the matter passed away from our ken very shortly, and soon it dropped entirely out of conversation even in the constant whirl of excitement.

Nor do I believe that in the ordinary course of events the criminal would ever have been discovered.

But I must not anticipate though the desire to do so at times is almost overwhelming.

A fortnight passed very rapidly.

I chiefly occupied my time in getting up plans for the amusement of the Tottenhams whom I considered myself bound to look after as they were such old friends and perfect strangers. Not that I objected to it, you must understand, for they were a jovial couple, and then Nellie was such a very engaging child.

My mornings as usual I spent chiefly with Lady Mabel and indeed tried very hard to persuade her to join in our excursions, but she had a perverse mood on her and invariably refused, in fact usually shut herself up for the greater part of the day and appeared nowhere. She stoutly denied that she was ill or I should have been anxious about her.

Gordon Leigh had in some mysterious way of his own completely won the heart of old Lord Hawthorne, and the result was that instead of being received on sufferance as on his first visit he was welcomed cordially whenever he chose to call and the old Earl invariably asked after him whenever we met.

I don't think that Lady Mabel troubled her disdainful head sufficiently about him to care and no doubt was only too glad that her papa had found some amusement. Besides, he read the paper to her papa and thereby saved her a daily penance which hitherto she had laboured at with a good will that bordered on heroism.

When he wasn't looking after Lord Hawthorne he was generally dancing attendance on Mrs. Tottenham whose affections he had also completely secured.

In short it struck me that Gordon Leigh was degenerating into a tame cat.

My opinion, however, was destined to be roughly shaken very shortly.

To tell the truth I had got into a way of chaffing him unmercifully about Mrs. Tottenham which he stood like an angel. It didn't seem to trouble him in the slightest,—in fact, it so clearly made no impression on him that it was more from habit than anything else that I continued to do so.

One memorable evening, however, Archer and I were seated in the smoking-room. There were a number of men there, among them a little Australian named Sydney a big friend of his called Jordan young Wing and several others almost all the men we knew in fact,—for our smoking-room was a general *rendez-vous* for all our acquaintances. Among others there was a tall American who was staying in the hotel with whom I had a sort of smoking acquaintance and who had got to know several of the *habitués* of the smoking-room in the same way.

Suddenly the door opened and Gordon Leigh appeared.

A laugh greeted his entrance.

"Later than ever, Gordon!" I cried. "This is getting worse and worse. What a ladies' man you are."

The American, who possibly had drunk away his discretion or was encouraged by my foolish speech and presumed on Leigh's usual forbearance thinking no doubt that it was allied to cowardice, made a very insulting remark to him.

"Did you intend that speech for me?" demanded Gordon Leigh blushing crimson and turning on him with a wicked unpleasant look in his dark eyes which I should never have dreamt him capable of.

"Why, cert'nly," responded the Yankee.

"Then I'll trouble you to apologise at once for your insolence," cried Gordon Leigh shrilly with the most imperious air, marching straight up to the man with his hands clenched and his eyes glittering more wickedly than ever.

"Guess I'll see you d——"

But before the word was well out of his mouth Gordon Leigh with fire flashing from his eyes and his face aflame struck him sharply across the cheek with his open hand.

It wasn't much of a blow and really I never saw one given in such a way before—it was only too evident that boxing did not form one of Leigh's accomplishments—but the big American startled and confused flung himself violently back to avoid it and fell backwards over his chair which he had tilted up Yankee fashion once too often.

After much struggling and a hurricane of oaths he got on his feet again and commenced an irregular rush at Gordon Leigh, who awaited him with demonish fury glaring from his eyes and his white teeth shining through his parted lips like the fangs of a wild beast.

The Yankee would certainly have felled him to the earth with one blow of his huge fist, but Jordan calmly put out his foot and tripped him up, and once more he fell heavily amid a roar of laughter.

Cursing like a fiend the man scrambled up again

hardly knowing which of his adversaries to attack first but clearly not liking the look of Jordan's muscular frame.

But Archer laid a vice-like grasp on his shoulder.

"Listen," he said sternly, "we are all friends here but you. You have grossly insulted one of us and he has treated you as you deserve. If you want any more brawling you must fight with one of your own size like me. But I am not going to allow you to maul a boy like that just because he is too plucky to stand your insults."

"No, no," cried Gordon Leigh shrilly; "let him fight me like a gentleman if he is one. I will give him as much satisfaction as he requires. Or if he is too cowardly to demand it I demand it of him."

"Nonsense, boy," said Archer; "hold your tongue and don't risk your skin for a fellow like this."

"Mr. Archer," shrieked Gordon Leigh in a paroxysm of fury, "I—I will not be insulted even by you. I have a right to satisfaction and I demand it unless this Yankee dog is cur enough to shrink from the consequences of his words."

"I guess, my young fighting-cock, that once I get you in front of my shooting-iron I'll give you satisfaction to last you for all eternity," snarled the American with a savage ferocity which made my blood run cold.

"Bah!" said Gordon Leigh, "the game of brag won't do here, my fine *monsieur*. Is there any gentleman present," he cried looking round appealingly, "who is acquainted with affairs of honour?"

"*Ja, ja*," said a foreign voice; and a German

officer, the Baron von Trantwitz a friend of Archer's, stepped forward promptly, and with much gesticulation expressed the pleasure and honour it would be to him to act for the Herr von Leigh in this matter.

The Yankee sulkily referred him to some friend of his own and left the room.

For a moment there was dead silence.

Then my astonishment found expression.

"Do you mean to say that you are really going to fight a duel with that fellow?" I gasped.

"Most certainly I am," replied Gordon Leigh briefly and sternly.

"And risk your life and his for such a trifle?" interposed Archer.

"My dear Archer," replied Leigh petulantly, "you really don't understand. You are English and of course you have your prejudices which don't hold good in other countries. I am not English thank Heaven, and there was no other course open to *me*. You can go through life of course relying on those big shoulders of yours, but I am not going to be insulted by a bully simply because he is bigger than me.

"Am I not right, Baron?"

"*Ja, ja*," assented the Baron. "The Herr's conduct has been the most honourable."

"But do you wish to *kill* the man?" I gasped once more. I don't think that if a thunderbolt had fallen at my feet it would have astonished me more than this outburst of insane rage on Gordon Leigh's part —little Gordon Leigh, whom we called Mrs. Tottenham's tame pussy.

"I don't *wish* to kill him," cried the little spitfire stamping his foot violently. "What does the life of a cur like that matter to me? But I shall shoot him with no more compunction than I would a cur that had bitten me."

At this brutal speech Archer gave vent to an exclamation of disgust, but Sydney took up the word.

"It is all very well," he said, "for big fellows like Archer and Jordan or even you, Buchanan, to despise duelling, but I understand Leigh better than you and he is right in the main. Supposing we'll say old Jordan here was to insult me; he's twice my size and so if I strike him the chances are he licks my head off. That seems a poor sort of justice, doesn't it? But if he knew I could challenge him he wouldn't insult me rashly. So it is with Leigh."

"That's so," assented Jordan, and there was a general murmur of assent—the opinion of the room was clearly favourable to Leigh.

"*Ja, ja*," added the Baron, who I am convinced would have said "*ja, ja*" to anything.

"I don't care a rap whether I am right or not," panted Leigh defiantly. "I shall do as I choose because I choose. The American eagle crowed very loud to-night; I mean to make him sing small to-morrow and not for the first time either."

"Have you fought a duel with an American before?" I inquired—really, wonders would never cease.

"*A* duel!" replied Leigh disdainfully. "*Five*, and I will fight five more if necessary. I hate the whole bullying nation."

"Did you kill each time?" inquired Sydney in a voice in which awe curiosity horror and admiration were strangely mingled.

"No," regretfully. "One time I fired a little late and my enemy's bullet scored my arm from elbow to shoulder; that disturbed my aim and I only broke his shoulder."

"Have you fought many duels?" pursued Sydney with morbid interest.

"A good number. Fifteen, I think; yes, fifteen."

"Fifteen!!!"

"Yes. To-morrow I shall say sixteen."

"*Ja*," remarked the Baron, "the Herr's reputation is the most illustrious."

"Most blood-thirsty I should say," commented Archer in an undertone.

I think altogether everybody's opinion of Gordon Leigh suffered a considerable transformation after this, most for the better, a few among whom was Archer for the worse.

I don't know exactly that it affected me much. I had always known it more or less though scarcely realizing it. And after all it would have been so different if Leigh had been an Englishman. And I must confess I really liked him personally as I have said.

I think that if the duel with the American had come off and Leigh had actually shot him I should have felt a violent sentiment of repulsion, but the wily Yankee evidently made inquiries which were not satisfactory, for though his friend was easily found next morning the principal quietly levanted and we saw his face no more.

I believe the adventure considerably improved Gordon Leigh's reputation in the eyes of the ladies.

Even Archer admitted that he was a plucky little fellow and had received great provocation.

CHAPTER IX.

CROSS PURPOSES.

People began to talk about Wing and Nellie after a time, referred to them as the two children and said they were a pretty couple. Miss Syrup, a handsome American girl with a beautiful profile and a sharp tongue, even took the trouble to inform me that Mr. Wing was quite mashed on that little yellow-haired girl, she surmised; and several other girls gave me a large amount of information of a similar kind which I really didn't want.

It was not likely, of course. It would have been absurd for any one to seriously fall in love with such a mere child. But it angered me because I didn't like to hear the little creature laughed at and I thought it inconsiderate of Wing.

I remember that Miss Syrup almost put me in a passion on the occasion of a ball given to the Prince of Wales. She had heard that Nellie was going, and she joked so much over this and over the "flirtation" and what a pity it all was, that I had the greatest difficulty in restraining myself from replying very sharply.

Mrs. Tottenham's consent to Nellie's premature

debût had only been won with great difficulty; for she had no special desire to degenerate into a mere chaperone before it was absolutely necessary besides really considering it a very bad thing for a child to be brought out too young. She laughed at the idea as a mere joke at first, and when she found we —that is, Nellie and myself—were really in earnest, peremptorily declined to allow it with some astonishment at my folly and Nellie's precociousness.

Tottenham, however, differed from her for probably the first time during their married life and argued that there was no reason why the child shouldn't go by way of a treat. Of course if they were in England it would be very different but here it wouldn't matter for once in a way.

I went on the tack of laying great stress on the fact that any one could see that she was a mere child and that she was not likely to get many partners so that really it was more like taking her to look on at the dance than taking her to it. I expect that Nellie would have been highly indignant if she had known anything of this line of argument; but no other would have had any chance of success with Mrs. Tottenham who had no intention of bringing her out for at least three years more.

However, I was successful and that was the great thing; and so in spite of Miranda Syrup's sneers Nellie appeared in the evening in a simple short white muslin frock with crimson ribbons and a few inches of crimson stocking showing beneath it. Her long hair swept in all its luxuriance over her shoulders. I know she had begged and prayed

to have it "put up," if only for this one night, but Mrs. Tottenham would not hear of "any such nonsense."

After exchanging a few words with Mrs. Tottenham, I turned to her daughter. She was gone; and the next minute with a strange feeling of rage I saw her whirling round the room in the embrace of young Wing.

A bitter execration escaped my lips which made Tottenham look at me inquiringly.

"A sudden twinge," I whispered in some confusion. "I really could not help it. I am afraid I shan't be able to dance after all."

"Gout!" hinted Tottenham.

"No, rheumatism," I replied glad that he took it so readily.

"Ugh!" he replied, "I don't envy you. That young fellow Wing," he continued turning towards the dancers, "dances very well, don't you think? Do you see, he's dancing with my little girl?"

Did I see? Yes, I did. I saw him whirling round with an expression of the most perfect bliss on his handsome, boyish face. I saw Nellie's golden head almost resting on his shoulder and her curls sweeping his cheek. I saw her eyes sparkling her cheek dimpling and her lips twitching with mirth and happiness as he whispered some soft nothing in her ear which no doubt the poor child took *au grand sérieux*. I saw all that and I remained calm —calm, with a volcano surging in my breast.

I cursed that young Wing, I cursed my own stupidity, and I doubly cursed Mrs. Tottenham who was the innocent cause of it all. And with

smothered curses rising rapidly from my heart I endeavoured to answer Tottenham with a bland smile of indifference—I should think it must have looked like the grin of a fiend.

"Yes, he dances very well. He is a good sort of boy I think."

"He is not exactly a boy, you know," replied Tottenham. "He has seen a lot of service at the Cape I hear and that makes a man of any one."

Confound him, what did I care. I wished he was seeing a lot more service at the Cape instead of abducting Nellie in this sneaking way. And besides he was positively introducing his friends—that was a great deal more generosity than I should have been capable of. The chances of my securing any dances appeared to be slight indeed unless——

"Oh, I did not mean to disparage him in any way I assure you," I replied at once. I was not going to let any one think that I cared a straw on the subject. "But after all he is a boy to old stagers like you and me."

"Ha, ha, ha! That's good," laughed Tottenham, cheerily; "I don't consider myself an old stager at all. And I can tell you, my dear fellow, that I am going to ask that saucy American girl to dance later on though you need not mention it to Minnie. By the bye is your charming friend, Lady Mabel, coming to-night?"

"Yes, I think so. I hope so," I replied. I was rather uncertain for Lady Mabel had had one or two slight attacks of indisposition lately; and though she always appeared smiling in the morning yet she was not at all reliable for the evening.

"Of course she'll come. You know she will. Is it likely she would stay away unless there was some very good reason?"

"I don't *know*. I hope she will but I know no more than you."

"Ha, ha, ha! Of course, my dear fellow. Ha, ha, ha! of course you don't. Sly dog, Buchanan, you'll excuse me I'm sure." And he laughed again as though one of us had said something witty.

I could not make out what he meant. I did not know anything about it and it really was not very civil of him to doubt me. I began to think that it was time I was uncivil to somebody and Tottenham was dangerously near.

However, quarrelling with Nellie's father would not have been the safest way of finding favour in her eyes so I abandoned that idea.

At last the dance ended and Nellie came towards us leaning on young Wing's arm. The child was simply radiant with pleasure but her partner looked slightly disconsolate. I suppose that he had calculated on the interval; but he had calculated without Mrs. Tottenham who had issued stringent orders that Nellie was to return to her at the end of each dance.

"Might I have a dance?" I inquired.

"Yes certainly, I shall be delighted," she replied giving me the card. "Oh, papa, Mr. Wing has been so kind. He has introduced me to no end of nice people and I have got a beautiful programme."

Mr. Wing with a slight accession of colour protested that he had done really nothing; that his

friends were highly honoured; that the pleasure of dancing with Miss Tottenham, etc., and a host of other sweet phrases.

I discovered that he had rewarded himself pretty liberally, however. Her card was covered with hieroglyphics among which the initials G. W. occurred pretty frequently.

There was positively only one dance left and that in the middle.

She might have kept me some.

A bitter thought sprang into my brain that Lady Mabel—haughty beauty as she was—would not have thrown over an old friend so completely.

"Can't you give me one before this?" I whispered showing her the programme.

"Let me see," she said; "I will if I can, Jack. No, I see I can't. I am so very sorry."

"Can't you give me one of these?" I urged pointing to the initials G. W. "One won't be missed among so many."

"No, I won't. I never heard of such an idea. How could I be so rude?" she replied flushing angrily.

"I think you might."

"You should have come earlier," she answered flushing a deeper red, "if you wanted them. Never mind, you will have more to keep." And she turned away with a strange expression in her eyes.

"I could not come before," I pleaded. "I was talking to your mother."

"You should have come to me first. I am not going shares with my mama, — or — *any one else*, though of course you have a perfect right to do as

you like. Yes certainly, Mr. Wing." And Mr. Wing proceeded to introduce a German baron at least six feet high with a huge yellow moustache about a foot long.

I quickly pencilled my name down for the only vacant dance.

There was a certain amount of pleasure in extinguishing the Baron von Bierbrunnen who I knew considered himself a tremendous lady-killer and was just the sort of man to enjoy turning her head completely for the pure fun of the thing.

I stood aside and I am afraid scowled rather at the group for a minute. The villainous Baron was loudly protesting with much gesticulation his utter desolation and despair at not getting a dance and I expect was endeavouring to persuade Nellie to give him a turn in some other person's dance—perhaps in mine—at some period of the evening according to the horrible German custom; while she was no doubt explaining that she was quite full and probably had not the least idea of what he was aiming at.

At that moment I saw Lady Hawthorn enter the room with her husband. Behind them came the brilliant figure of Lady Mabel. Thanking Heaven that there were some women who did not share in the villainous ingratitude and coquetry which is the chief characteristic of the majority of the sex I hastened to secure her for a dance. She received me with a most gracious smile and took my arm at once.

As we strolled leisurely into the dancing-room I saw Nellie pass rapidly by her tiny hand hooked in the baron's huge arm.

"Quick!" she cried, "oh, quick! what a heavenly waltz!" And the next minute she was whirling round the room in the baron's arms at a pace which would have made a teetotum giddy.

She had thrown her partner over for a perfect stranger though she had positively refused to do so for me. I could have stamped with rage.

"What is the matter with you?" whispered Lady Mabel. "You look as though you had seen a ghost."

"Do I?" I replied trying to laugh unconcernedly. "No such luck."

"You are not going to be ill, are you?" she continued with an unconcealed anxiety which surprised me. I supposed she dreaded a scene. "If you find this room too hot let us go and sit somewhere in the cool. I am not in any special hurry to begin dancing; and it will be much better fun later on when some of these worthy Germans have killed themselves off with their violent gymnastics."

"I agree with you," I replied, eagerly. "There are some capital seats about; and really there is no pleasure in dancing when all these cannon balls are flying about in that reckless way without the slightest attempt at steering. I would much rather have a quiet talk with you." I meant it too for she was looking unusually handsome to-night; and besides the thought that Nellie would dance with every one but me had quite taken away any pleasure in dancing.

I felt her arm contract faintly in mine, but as she remained mute I did not attach any special significance to it. I took it as a sign of assent.

We strolled out of the ball-room in search of seats, and eventually discovered in one of the outlying rooms a highly luxurious sofa piled with soft cushions on which Lady Mabel deposited her graceful form; and after a few minutes spent in arranging everything to her satisfaction leant her head back on the yielding cushions and smiled up at me with an expression of perfect content.

I surveyed her meanwhile with something a little beyond ordinary admiration. She looked really lovely to-night—as I had never seen her before; or was it that my eyes were more open to her loveliness. She was dressed with the most consummate art and her natural charms shone all the brighter in their skilfully designed surroundings like an exquisite picture in a delicately moulded frame.

A crafty combination of bronze plush brocade and satin on which the light rippled in strange shifting sheeny wavelets,—the whole faultlessly made, the thick folds hiding yet revealing each line and curve of her lovely figure. Diamonds glittered in her shell-like ears. Her white creamy throat was encircled by a string of the largest brilliants from which depended a cross that shone like fire in the flickering light of the chandeliers. And she herself —I looked at her critically as I caught the outline of her profile, raising my eyes from her pouting Cupid's bow of a mouth to her delicate little straight nose and thence to her violet eyes and ivory brows. She looked rather like a Greek goddess I thought—that is if one could imagine a Greek goddess with violet eyes and red-gold hair. Her eyes were her best point undoubtedly and

that was the highest praise: large lustrous shining amid the thick dark feathery lashes they lighted up her face like suns and shed a subtle charm a witchery of expression that relieved the classic coldness of the features and the otherwise set expression of the face. And then how marvellously they contrasted with the rich, warm golden locks twined in thick heavy coils round the small head.

"Aren't you going to sit down too?" she said, catching my eye at last, and a soft smile curving her ruby lips as she flirted her jewelled fan open with a tiny hand encased in a Jouvin glove as in a second skin.

How marvellously tiny it was! and yet not tinier in proportion than that delicate little foot which just peeped beneath the folds of her dress.

"What are you staring at?" she cried again rather pettishly. "You make me feel quite uneasy. Do you want to find fault with anything? Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? no!" I replied rather confused at my rudeness and speaking my real thoughts before I realised their meaning. "I was thinking how simply lovely you looked to-night.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake don't begin to flatter!" she cried half angrily, half imploringly while the rich blood mantled warmly to her delicate cheek,—in anger or pleasure I hardly knew which. "That I could not stand. It is bad enough from the others. But I thought that you at least were sincere."

"I meant no flattery," I replied. "The words

slipped out quite unintentionally. If I had had time to think I should have turned some more delicate compliment instead of coming out with the truth wholesale."

The blush deepened on her cheek; she bit her lips and turned away her head. There was nothing for her to be angry about really or I should have concluded she was going into a passion.

"Listen to me," she said after a minute which she had spent apparently in contemplation of the workmanship of her fan which was a gem of art in its way as indeed most of her things were. "If we are to remain friends, if you really care for my friendship as I hope and trust you do, you must promise never to pay me compliments. I am sure I should hate you if you did."

"Do you mean untrue compliments?" I suggested.

"I mean *any* compliments. Come, is it a bargain? If so shake hands on it."

"So be it." And we shook hands warmly.

"And now tell me all about the nursery," she continued settling herself a little sideways so that she could look straight at me.

"What do you mean?" I replied laughing.

"Why, have you not been acting as head nurse to that pretty little Nellie Tottenham all this week? Don't deny it, I assure you I don't care!"

"I never supposed you did!"

"Didn't you?" she said in a strange, harsh tone compressing her lips tightly; "and so you acknowledge the soft impeachment?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I must—that is, I have

been trotting the whole family all over the place if that is what you mean by being head nurse."

"Yes of course; and how do you like milk and water? Is it an agreeable change?"

"Well yes, it is," I acknowledged candidly. "It is very amusing at times."

"Is she very *blasée?*"

"Yes, I am afraid she is at present; but of course she will get over that when she comes out."

"She seems to have come out to some extent to-night," said Lady Mabel significantly. "Do you approve?"

"Well, of course it is no business of mine; but I think it is a mistake to bring children out too soon." You will observe that my ideas had undergone a considerable change.

"Why?" she inquired shortly.

"They get a great deal of admiration and compliments if they are pretty which they take *au grand sérieux* and it is rather apt to turn their heads."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" she remarked thoughtfully bending her fan backwards and forwards in rather a reckless way considering that she had told me it was an heirloom.

"And then of course they go and fall idiotically in love with some highly undesirable person," I continued perhaps a little bitterly.

"Yes, I see," she interjected.

"You will break your fan if you don't take care," I suggested mildly.

"No, I shan't," she answered sharply; "and does the little girl dance well?"

"I really don't know," I replied shortly.

"Does Mr. Wing dance well?"

"I really have never noticed. Yes, I believe he does."

"And I suppose you are going to dance a great deal with her?"

"On the contrary," I replied with a forced laugh, "she is surrounded by so many admirers that there is no room for me."

"Ah," she said, drawing a deep breath almost like a person in pain, "I suppose she can't give you any dances at the beginning?"

"No; I have just got one in the middle. That's not much use as she will probably be gone."

Snap! The beautiful fan had gone at last; the fragile sticks bent recklessly in her strong grasp had broken straight in half and lay a miserable wreck in her hands.

"Good Heaven!" I cried in astonishment and sorrow. "What a pity,—that beautiful fan."

"Yes, it is broken at last," she replied looking at me with a fierce glitter in her eyes almost as if she thought it was my fault; "some things will break if they are strained too much."

"What a great pity!" I repeated looking at her rather bewildered by her strange manner; "and an heirloom too!"

"What does it matter?" she said wildly. "Why shouldn't I break it? It is mine. *I* have done no one any harm!"

"Let me have it!" I interposed endeavouring to take the fragments from her hands. "I can get it set right and no one will suspect that it has ever been broken!"

"Thank you," she answered icily with an angry light in her eyes. If I want it mended I can get it done myself."

"Yes, but——" I began.

"Listen to me," she answered rising and looking me straight in the face. "I would not let you have this fan if you went down on your knees to ask for it, no, nor anything of mine. I wouldn't, I wouldn't, I wouldn't," she added with increasing vehemence.

"But really——"

"Take me back to the ball-room," she cried peremptorily almost rudely. "I don't feel at all well and I shall go home."

There was a rudeness about her tone and manner which made me excessively indignant for I could not see that I had done anything to deserve such treatment. After all what was the cause? All this ridiculous display of temper about a trumpery fan,—it was too absurd.

And so without a word I offered her my arm and led her back to the ball-room.

It was the first time she had shown me the sharp claws beneath her beautiful velvet fur and I felt sore and angry. Her ill-humour seemed so utterly unreasonable.

"Papa," she cried stopping the old earl who was limping across the room as well as his gout would allow him, "I want to go home."

"Certainly, my dear," he replied; "I can't say that I am very anxious to stay myself but your mother insists on our stopping till the Prince comes. Do you feel unwell?"

"Yes, yes," she answered in some confusion.

"Lady Mabel has had the misfortune to break her fan," I interposed politely—I felt revengeful just then—"and it has upset her a little."

"Break her fan! upset her!" cried Lord Hawthorne in astonishment, "what do you mean? Mabel, has he gone mad or have you?"

"I don't feel well, really," persisted Mabel blushing unaccountably till her face was the colour of a peony.

"Well, I must say you look very odd," replied her father surveying her critically; "you look as if you had got scarlet fever."

To my astonishment I saw tears start from her lovely eyes while she stamped her foot with vexation, and in a voice that was most decidedly broken by sobs she cried:

"You are perfectly odious, papa; I tell you I feel very ill."

"I expect it's all temper," muttered the earl in a stage aside which was distinctly audible. "I wonder what he has been doing—nothing probably or she would not be in such a rage."

"Do you hear, papa? I shall go home."

"Yes, my dear, certainly," mumbled her father, "go home by all means. Buchanan, I wish you would take her back if it's not boring you. I can't possibly go till the Prince has arrived." And as he turned away I heard him distinctly remark in another stage-whisper, "I suppose she has been quarrelling with him—stupid of her."

My own private impression was that there must be hereditary insanity in the family, which was

liable to manifest itself under very different forms in the various members.

Here was a pretty predicament. I could not possibly leave the angry beauty to find her way home alone; besides now that my first burst of indignation was over I really felt more amused than anything else at this unaccountable attack of temper, and yet she had practically told me that she did not desire my company.

"I am grieved," I remarked as gravely as I could though I am afraid I did not entirely conceal the laugh in my eyes—"I am grieved to obtrude my unwelcome presence on you any longer; and yet you must see that it is impossible for you——"

"I hate you," she cried turning on me like a tigress; "you are cruel and horrible. I would sooner jump out of the window than owe anything to you."

"But I cannot leave you here alone."

"Yes, you can; I don't want a chaperone. I am a chaperone myself—quite an old woman."

"But if you are not well——"

"I am well, perfectly well. I never was better in my life," she interrupted rather inconsistently.

"Then, if you find the ball dull——" I persisted rather unwisely.

"On the contrary I am perfectly happy. I intend to enjoy myself immensely." And by way of commentary to this remark two large tears started from her eyes and coursed slowly down her cheeks. She dashed them angrily away, and turning her back on me, walked towards an open window and leant out.

I waited for a few minutes out of sheer pity, for really her impertinence had deprived me of all desire for any further conversation; but she gave no sign that she was aware of my presence, though I thought once I heard a sound that was suspiciously like a sob.

And so at last I left her.

CHAPTER X.

LOVE OR JEALOUSY?

I STOOD for a few minutes looking at the dancers and endeavouring to make out whether Nellie was in the room or not. Suddenly I heard my name mentioned by the couple in front.

"I tell you that she is over head and ears in love with Mr. Buchanan," said a girl's voice.

Impelled by unwarrantable curiosity, I listened—listeners never hear good of themselves, says the proverb.

"Do you think so?" replied another voice—a man's. "I have been partly suspecting it myself for some time. Anyhow he is not in love with her."

"Oh no; he is in love with Nellie Tottenham, if such a selfish creature can be in love with any one but himself."

Pleasant that; and I always prided myself on my unselfishness.

"Well, *she* is not in love with him," laughed the man.

"Nellie, do you mean?" inquired the girl.

"Yes, certainly."

"No, she's lost her silly little heart to young Wing—what a good looking boy he is."

"H'm, tastes differ," replied the man; "rather too much like a girl to suit me."

"Not a bit like a girl," asseverated the girl angrily; "he is very manly."

"Will be, you mean," laughed the man maliciously, "when he has grown his moustache and lost the art of blushing."

"You are a horrid quiz," laughed the girl. "It is very odd, but then it is so refreshing to think that any of your sex can blush now-a-days."

"Thank you for nothing. But to return to our muttons; I suppose young Wing has lost his heart to Lady Mabel, that would make the cycle of love complete. I declare it is like the old nursery rhyme:

'The fire began to burn the stick,
The stick began to beat the dog,
The dog began to bite the pig,'

and so on. I spare you the rest."

"Which is the stick?" interposed the girl.

"Don't know, I'm sure. The little girl I should think. Certainly not the brilliant Lady Mabel Mornington."

"I believe you are in love with her yourself."

"I? Oh no, I am in love with nobody. So then Lady Mabel is in love with Buchanan, who is in love with little Nellie, who is in love with Master Wing, who is in love with Lady Mabel. Evidently he prefers mutton to lamb."

"Yes, but you are quite wrong there. Master Wing is not in love with Lady Mabel; he has no eyes for any one but that silly little Tottenham child."

"So then the affection is mutual there and the handsome widow is entirely out in the cold?"

"Yes. Look," she cried suddenly, "I wonder how many more times they are going to dance together; three out of five dances is not bad by way of a beginning."

With a strange choking sensation in my throat I looked up at these words and saw Nellie and young Wing circling slowly and rhythmically round the room with the greatest enjoyment depicted on their youthful countenances.

This was too much.

I passed rapidly from the room.

But then I thought of Lady Mabel and the girl's words.

Could she possibly be in love with me—me, when her wealth and beauty entitled her to choose among the highest in the land! It seemed utterly incredible.

And yet—was it so?

Did not it explain much that was inexplicable before?

Why did she manifest such an open dislike for any woman I paid attention to or even any man whom I liked over much? Witness her attacks on Eva Archer, her utter scorn of Gordon Leigh.

Why had she shut herself up of late, except at such times when she knew I would come to her and her alone?

Why had she questioned me so about Nellie Tottenham to-night unless it was to find out why I was not dancing with her? And then her wild burst of rage; no doubt she thought I had come to her as a *pis-aller* because I had been thrown over by Nellie.

It was enough to make any woman mad with rage at such a humiliation.

Triple idiot that I had been. I would not have angered her for worlds, far less insulted her. My heart overflowed with bitter remorse and that pity which is so near akin to love—and yet so different.

I hurried to the room where I had seen her last. She was still leaning out of the window.

The window was sunk in a deep bow, over the mouth of which heavy curtains hung half concealing the interior, so that the casual observer might have imagined the recess tenantless unless his eye had caught the golden sheen of her dress flashing in the fitful light that glistened uncertainly through the narrow opening between the curtains.

As I stepped gently to her side, I saw that her face was buried in her hands and her graceful form shook convulsively all over.

She was weeping violently.

I don't exactly know what was the precise purpose with which I had sought her again. Rage with Nellie had clouded my brain, and through it shone only an intense pity for the woman whose feelings must be the counterpart of mine. There was no definite intention formed in my mind, except perhaps a vague determination to force through the

barrier of her offended pride and make my peace at any price.

Now that I had found her, I stood for a moment gazing at the splendid curve of her figure, and the feeling rose to my brain, prompted no doubt half by jealousy half by conceit, that this woman was far more worthy of a man's love than that silly little immature girl who could hardly realize the meaning of love as yet.

You will say that my cool assumption that Lady Mabel was violently in love with me was as outrageous a stretch of conceit as any you have come across. Possibly, but did not this cool assumption explain much that was otherwise unexplainable? Besides if I had had any doubts before they would all have been swept away when I saw her attitude of utter misery and heard the low, deep sobs which convulsed her frame. I spoke to her softly.

She made no answer. Evidently she heard nothing.

I spoke again a little louder. She started suddenly up, and then at the sight of me shrank back against the wall in an attitude of the utmost terror her eyes dilated and her hands clasped convulsively.

"Oh!" she gasped with a shudder almost as if she expected a blow.

"For God's sake!" I cried, "don't look like that. It cuts me to the heart to see you. What have I done that you should be so unforgiving?"

"Nothing, nothing," she muttered miserably; "oh, nothing. I assure you it is nothing," she added looking at me with a faint ghost of a smile; but she

was too utterly miserable and overcome to keep up the pretence, and she would have fallen heavily had I not caught her just in time.

Then I went mad. The pressure of her body, the sweet, faint perfume which floated around her, the soft touch of her hair which had fallen down and swept across my face and shoulders—all these elements of intoxication combined with the sharp secret sting of jealousy to drive me into a state of reckless madness that I mistook for love.

I don't remember what I did exactly. I know that I laid her gently on the sofa. I know that I tried to revive her, and that at last in despair I caught the beautifully shaped head in my arms and pressed warm kisses on the rich dewy lips in bewildering succession, until at last the light came back to the violet eyes and she looked up into mine with an expression of the most ineffable happiness that made my heart beat wildly as I never thought it could beat for her.

She made one faint effort of resistance, that was all, and then she lay unresisting in my arms returning kiss for kiss.

There was very little said, and that not of very general interest, though it seemed wonderfully interesting to us. I know that I told her I loved her; and she told me she had loved me since the first day she saw me. She told me how she had hated every woman she had ever seen me speak to, and that the idea that I loved Nellie Tottenham had nearly driven her out of her senses.

We must have remained there for hours, I think, saying little indeed, and that chiefly consisting of

vain repetitions. But if our tongues were mute our eyes and lips were full of the richest eloquence.

At the end we came out engaged—with an express understanding that we should be married as soon as possible, to-morrow if it could be done, and start for Switzerland the same day. She had plenty of clothes, she argued; she was her own mistress entirely; her mother could take care of the little Bella for the present; why then should we defer our happiness merely for the sake of relations who could easily be asked to festivities later on? Why, indeed? With her soft cheek pressed against mine and the sweet perfume of her breath steeping my senses I would easily have consented to far harder conditions.

The heavy masses of hair had to be re-arranged in an impromptu fashion with my help—I may add that the will was excellent if the execution was not high-class.

Under the strictest orders to tell the truth, I pronounced that her eyes and nose were quite presentable, that her face was hardly at all flushed considering all things, and that her hair looked as smooth and shining as could be desired. Then I expressed my complete approval in the usual mode of a lover.

And so we sallied out and strolled leisurely into the dancing-room trying to look unconscious.

I remember distinctly that it was the tenth dance when we came into the room. The eleventh was really Nellie's but we decided that I should make excuses to her and then we would go home.

We found her looking tired and worn as though the dance had been too much for her.

I made my excuses with, I am afraid, but a hollow pretence of regret.

She looked at me fixedly, then shot a glance at Mabel hanging on my arm.

"Oh, it doesn't matter at all," she answered quite rudely but with strangely quivering lips, and turned away taking no notice of the hand I proffered her. Her partner led her aside and that was the end.

Mabel went to the cloak-room in search of her wonderful golden-brown plush cloak with the *chartreuse* satin lining and broad borders of bear that was the envy of all Homburg. I waited for her in the hall—not without an angry reflection that Nellie's conduct was unaccountably rude and strange. No one but a mere child would have shown such obvious *pique*.

As I was standing waiting in this way a voice whispered in my ear:

"Are you to be congratulated?"

It was Gordon Leigh looking pale and stern as though the dance had not been very pleasant to him.

"Yes," I replied, but not as enthusiastically as I ought—there was something chilling in his manner.

He fixed his eyes on me with somewhat of the brilliant glitter which I had seen in them the night when the American insulted him.

"Shall *I* congratulate you?" he said coldly and sternly after a moment's silence.

"Certainly, old chap," I replied, with an attempt

at heartiness. But his icy manner seemed to chill my blood.

"I congratulate you then," he said slowly. Then he suddenly broke into a peal of mocking eldritch laughter and was gone—so quickly that I had no time to say a word in reply.

The next minute Mabel appeared cloaked and ready looking perfectly radiant. I shook off the uncanny feeling that was creeping over me and hastened towards her.

"Who was that laughing in that horrible way?" she inquired.

"Gordon Leigh."

"It sounded like the fiend," she answered with a slight shiver. For the first time in my life I did not defend him. We strolled home together as slowly as possible, talking in low whispers though there was no one to hear, and building so many rose-coloured castles in the air. Ah, me! My poor Mabel!

I interviewed Lord Hawthorne in his bedroom that same evening and obtained his consent and blessing without the slightest difficulty. Nor did he demur to our immediate marriage. It concerned us chiefly, he said; we were neither of us children.

As I bade Mabel good-night and saw the utter devotion shining in her eyes, an impulse of unusual tenderness came over me and I kissed her upturned face with more real love for her in my heart than I had known yet. And with it came a feeling of great uneasiness, a foreboding of impending evil that was as sudden as it was strange.

I literally dreaded to leave the house almost as

though I knew of the horror standing without, waiting, waiting. O God! it chills my blood even to think of it now.

She accompanied me to the gate of the little garden, and we stood for some time with clasped hands saying over our farewells and yet lingering still.

But I went at last. How could I stay? I went slowly back to the Victoria and sat for an hour in the smoking-room thinking.

Of all sorts of odd things: of Mabel, of Nellie, of my future life, of blighted love, of Gordon Leigh's strange manner, of Heaven knows what beside, and ever of Mabel again and again with the same vague uneasy feeling.

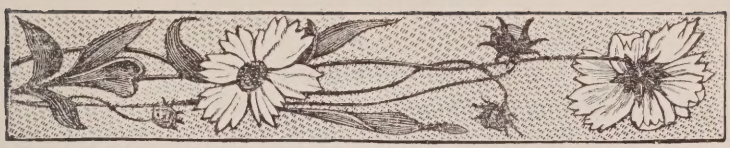
I rose at last with a deep sigh and went out. To my astonishment I saw within ten yards of me the figure of a woman moving slowly away up the passage. I uttered a slight exclamation of surprise and she turned her head so that the light fell on her pale, stern face.

It was Eva Archer.

For a moment I stood spell-bound as though I had seen a vision.

Then it struck me that it probably was Eva Archer herself going to bed late. Her room was in that direction.

My way was exactly opposite.



CHAPTER XI.

THE UNSPEAKABLE.

I HARDLY feel even at this distance of time as though I could write calmly about the events which followed. It is like breaking open old wounds long since healed.

And yet I must continue now I have begun.

It almost maddens me at times to think of the villainy at work, the "damned smiling villainy," the ghastly mockery of friendship by which we were betrayed, the hideous craft and cunning which misused all our kindliest feelings that it might better accomplish its infernal purpose, the cool, deliberate, insolent affectation of innocence and sincerity which led our minds so entirely astray, the revolting callousness with which the *rôle* of kindly forgiving sympathy was maintained even under the most awe-inspiring circumstances.

And to think that Archer should have been deceived as well—Archer who boasted himself so skilled in woman's wiles and woman's ways. *He* should have seen through the thin mask at once.

But his eyes were blinded by love and he guessed nothing of the truth.

I rose early next morning for there was much to do. I had to inquire into the law of the question. Could we be married that day, and if so, how? Then if it were possible, which seemed to me more and more improbable the more I thought of it, I had to make arrangements for our immediate marriage and joint exodus directly afterwards. All of which would take time.

How heartless this seems to me now that I have written it! and yet like a child shivering on the river's brink even this seems better than the inevitable plunge that is to follow.

* * * * *

As I entered the bureau of the hotel to inquire where the English consul lived, a white-faced, scared-looking man whom I recognised as the Hawthorne's courier, was haranguing a select audience consisting of the manager porter and a few others in a very excited fashion with much gesticulation.

I didn't catch the drift of his words and he ceased suddenly when he saw me. He had come with a message for me, it appeared. Lady Hawthorne was in great trouble and anxious to see me at once.

I thought at the time that but for the utter improbability of the thing I should have imagined that the man was labouring under some great and irresistible terror. His face was ashy pale and his teeth chattered as if with intense cold.

I told him I would come at once.

"You had better have something before you go," said Steinmetz suddenly breaking the silence which had fallen on him and his companions when I entered. "It is very cold and raw out."

I declined of course but he insisted.

"You had better take it, *mein* Herr," he urged pouring out a glass of *liqueur* brandy with a hand which shook so much that he spilt some of it. "It is really very cold. You had much better take it." And he held the glass out to me very unsteadily.

He didn't look as though he had been drinking but his conduct was certainly singular.

I thought it must be the effect of cold, and so I swallowed the brandy and started for the Promenade.

I was shown into the drawing-room by a girl whose red swollen eyes and *crying* voice alarmed me excessively. I asked her what had happened, and she broke down at once, cried and sobbed as though her heart would break, and ran away dabbing her apron against her eyes.

Very much shaken by this and almost wild with doubts and fears, I waited on thorns till Lord Hawthorne came.

He was not long, and when he entered the room I knew at once that some horrible misfortune had fallen on the family. The poor old man looked completely broken down. His eyes were hot and heavy with sorrow, and as he spoke to me I could see that burning tears welled up ever and anon from an inexhaustible fount of woe. And yet amid his own infinite sorrow there was such kindly, gentle ten-

derness for me, tenderness for the awful shock which it was his sad duty to inflict on me.

He told me—but no, I cannot write it as he told it me.

He broke it to me, oh, so tenderly, with almost womanly gentleness, poor old man! with such infinite compassion for me, when the greatness of his own woe might well have swallowed up all thought of others. His dear daughter—my promised wife—was dead, foully murdered in her sleep.

For a few moments I was completely stunned, stupified, hardly hearing what he said, answering at random, conscious only that the room swam dizzily round me, that the air seemed full of black shapeless ever-moving forms; and with a dim feeling that it must be only a hideous dream, and that I must wake up soon when the regimental band passed under my window.

And then it all gave way to a dull aching pain at my heart as though a hot iron were burning slowly there. My eyes became hot and painful till I longed for the tears that would not come, and my throat was so parched and dry that when I spoke I started at the sound of my own voice—it seemed so hollow and strange.

They took me to the chamber of Death and showed me the body of my darling laid on the bed, with the pale beautiful face turned to the sky looking so calm and peaceful in its silent repose that I knew—and the thought brought some faint shadow of relief to my surcharged heart—that she had died painlessly, unconscious of the cruel hand which was aimed at her innocent life.

I gazed at her with a whirlwind of conflicting emotions raging in my soul and then a passionate desire for vengeance overcame all. With my eyes dim with scalding tears that brought no relief to my heart I sank on my knees by her side and swore to devote my life to the pursuit of her assassin. Moved by an irresistible impulse I rose and kissed the clay-cold lips that had been warm with life and love but a few hours since; and then reverently covering the pale, calm face I left the presence of the dead.

I pass over the sad days which followed.

* * * * *

Later investigations revealed the following ghastly story.

The murder appeared to have been committed for the vulgar motive of robbery; the valuable diamonds which poor Mabel had worn the night before were missing. But at the same time there was a deliberate and unnecessary cruelty about a murder under such circumstances that the wildest conjectures were rapidly afloat. Moreover, it soon became apparent that the same daring hand which had struck down the old banker in his own office in broad day, had aimed the blow which had bereft my innocent betrothed of life. The details were almost exactly the same. There was the same evidence that chloroform had been used to neutralise all possibility of resistance, the same devilish precision about the position of the blow, the same triangular-shape to the wound itself as though a bayonet were the weapon used to inflict it. There was again the same intimate knowledge of the

habits of the family which enabled the assassin to go with unerring accuracy to the selected victim's room on the very night when those fatal diamonds were likely to be lying loose on her toilette-table and when the whole household exhausted with sitting up late would be buried in the profoundest repose. The entrance to the house had been effected with the same prompt daring. There appeared to be little doubt that the assassin must have dogged us home from the ball and hidden among the bushes in the small garden in front of the house until I reappeared; had taken the opportunity to slip into the house while my poor love walked with me hanging on my arm down to the gate. Then, when she had retired to her room and all was quiet in the house, the dark murderous figure came from its hiding-place and stole silently up the stairs with the cautious noiseless tread of a wild beast on the track of prey.

The horror of it chills my blood even now as I look in fancy on the picture I have conjured up. I see the lithe stealthy crouching form, the glaring wolfish eyes aflame with horrible determination; I hear the low cautious breathing, just faintly audible, just distinct enough to tell of the human tiger gliding up the stairs; I hear the muffled sound of the handle turning slowly, gently, almost inaudibly, the scarcely-heard noise of the door opening—that door marked out with such horrible precision—and, my God! that white cruel face with the glaring fiery eyes is gazing murderously on the unconscious victim sleeping so peacefully, dreaming of future happiness, perhaps smiling in her dreams.

There was not the faintest trace of a struggle. The assassin must have found her sleeping, drugged her senses with the resistless agent, and stabbed her cruelly and deliberately, departing with the same silent noiseless tread that woke no soul slumbering in that fated house.

How did we guess all this? you will say in shrill incredulity.

We found *her* door slightly open. We found traces of muddy footprints on the doorstep entering the house going along the hall up the stairs right into *her* room to the side of the bed, thence to the toilet-table, and back again growing fainter and fainter till they died away indistinguishably on the stairs. One of the servants mentioned that they had found the front door unbolted and unlocked in the morning merely fastened by the latch. Lastly, we found unmistakable traces in the garden in the shape of crushed flowers broken shrubs and trodden-up earth of the presence of some heavy body among them the night before, and here and there even distinct footprints which corresponded exactly to the footprints on the stairs. A careful police examination failed to reveal the presence of any suspicious circumstance among the belongings of the household. There were no stains which could not be accounted for, no garments mysteriously missing, no boots covered with mud, no foot-coverings which could possibly correspond to those tiny, delicate footprints which were so obviously a woman's. There was not the slightest trace of any motive against the poor victim among the servants or the proprietors; on the contrary,

she had been universally beloved by them. Their grief and indignation were too ready and demonstrative not to be genuine.

There appeared little doubt that the valuable diamonds which she wore so rashly had excited the greed of the secret criminal. But there our conjectures ended. What could have induced such a cruel, unnecessary crime except pure wolfish thirst for blood, we were utterly at a loss to imagine.

Public opinion at once denounced the tall, dark woman who had killed the banker as the author of this murder as well, and a thrill of horror ran through the whole community at the thought that this human tigress was still at large, nay, might be standing smiling in our very midst, mocking our vain conjectures perhaps, marking out a fresh victim with those keen, observant eyes, planning a fresh crime in that cruel, crafty brain. It was only too apparent now that the criminal was really a woman. The smallness of the footprints rendered it impossible to believe in the theory of a man in disguise. Gordon Leigh's boots were gigantic compared to them; and even Sydney, who owned the smallest feet I had ever seen on a man and was strongly suspected of wearing boots a great deal too small for him, took an early opportunity of drawing general attention to the extremely unladylike character of the footprints he made.

In short, a panic of suspicion or being suspected seized on all. It was well known in a very short time and firmly believed that the murder must have been committed by some one who had been at the ball the night before, who had watched our

conduct and drawn conclusions,—had calculated that I should accompany Mabel home and relied on our pre-occupation for effecting an entrance unperceived,—possibly even anticipated that we should linger over our farewells, that she would come back with me to the gate and stand for a minute looking after my retreating figure waving a last fond adieu. It seemed also indisputable that the murderess must have had some previous knowledge of the geography of the house,—must have known exactly which door to make for. Reflection, however, showed that to acquire this knowledge it was not absolutely necessary to be even on visiting terms with the Hawthornes. The assumption, however, that the assassin was actually a friend, even an intimate one, of the bereaved family was the only hypothesis which supplied anything like a reasonable motive for the murder, which otherwise seemed a wholly unnecessary piece of brutality. Given, however, a woman on terms of outward friendship with the dead, there was an almost illimitable field of motives which might prompt her to give full vent to her hatred when the opportunity lay ready and impunity was almost assured. The other hypothesis that Mabel had suddenly awoke,—had endeavoured to raise the alarm and had been stabbed to the heart while springing from the bed, seemed almost untenable in the face of the total absence of any signs of a struggle. Still it was not conclusively disproved. It was just possible that the murderess had calmly and callously set to work, when the deed of blood was accomplished, to remove all traces of the struggle which had actually taken place, and re-

arrange the disordered bed. Nothing, in fact, seemed impossible in the presence of what she *had* done.

The more I thought of it, the more firmly convinced was I that this was no ordinary murder committed to hide the lesser crime. There was some more powerful motive at work and the robbery was comparatively but a secondary part of the horrible programme. That Mabel had been murdered by a woman who hated her personally for her beauty her wealth her rank her success or some utterly trivial reason, and who made use of her personal knowledge of the victim and of what had occurred at the ball to destroy her with impunity, I had no more doubt when my investigations were at an end than I had of the murder itself. And once more I solemnly vowed to spare neither money nor labour not even my own life if by sacrificing it I could hunt her down to the death she merited.

There seemed but a slight chance of success. I really suspected no one. How is it possible to suspect without reason people with whom one is on the closest terms of intimacy? and yet on my own theory I must seek among Mabel's circle of friends —that is, my own—for the murderess. I could think of no one who had ever shown the slightest hostility towards her or who had any cause for jealousy except Eva Archer and Nellie,—Nellie, because she had never shown any liking for the dead woman; Eva, because the two were the rival beauties of the place. But the idea of suspecting Nellie was too absurd:—I should as soon have suspected Wing or Gordon Leigh. And as for Eva, well, you know that there were circumstances which

made me look on Eva as an uncanny person in theory though she always appeared a gentle innocent light-hearted creature whose sole thought was her husband.

Still I remembered that face in the passage. Was that pure imagination?

And as I brooded over my thoughts, the voice of the dead seemed to ring like distant solemn music in my ears:

"A warning to beware of that woman,—of some great misfortune impending of which she will be the cause."

And yet there was not the faintest shadow of evidence against her. How could she have got into the hotel again unnoticed by the porter who had sworn that no one came in after me on the night of the murder?

* * * * *

The bereaved parents returned to England at the end of the week, taking with them the body of their daughter. They could not bear to leave her in the inhospitable soil of Germany. She would lie more peacefully in the quiet churchyard of her Berkshire home. I went with them. They told me that they regarded me as a son, and I regarded the dead as my bride.

But I returned soon,—returned to find the place so changed! Most of the old set had moved off in alarm. The Tottenhams were gone back to England. The Archers had departed south for Italy. Gordon Leigh was supposed to have started for the Riviera with a suspicion of Monte Carlo. Only Sydney and Jordan remained at the Victoria, and

they seemed lonely and miserable enough to be glad even to see my haggard face again and to listen to my endless talk on the one subject I had any interest in now.

Not that the place was empty. It filled faster almost than it emptied, people being actually obliged to go away unable to obtain rooms. The manœuvres in fact were beginning and the new arrivals were unaffected by the panic which had gradually died away.

Rumours indeed, floated wildly about among the shopkeepers that a tall dark woman had been seen in the evenings prowling about the lime-walks and along the Promenade, but the witnesses had invariably taken to their heels at the sight of her and there was a shadowiness about their evidence which was unconvincing.

She had stayed her hand however. There had been no repetition of the crime which had turned our joy into bitter mourning. If she were still in the place her thirst for blood and her greed for plunder were appeased for a while. Possibly her fears were aroused and her ingenuity daunted by the hedge of precautions with which the place was now invested and by the consciousness that the lynx eyes of the craftiest of the Berlin police might be peering for her under the least suspected and most plausible exterior.

I thought myself that this silence was delusive. On my theory the woman must have left the place, and I would have given my very soul to know in what guise she had smiled her adieus to Homburg as the train steamed on its course towards the Rhine.

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER.

Six o'clock in Rotten Row on a soft dreamy day in June. The blinding sun, which had baked the great city almost to madness all through the long dry afternoon, had veiled its glowing rays in a thin purple mist ere commencing its downward course towards the western horizon. The great heat gradually giving off, a light cool breeze arose amid the long drives and green walks and shed its reviving influence on all the weary parched living things that swarmed along the veins and arteries of the great Park.

The gay world awoke from the hot languor of the afternoon, and attracted by the grateful coolness sallied forth in their thousands to enjoy the fresh air and meet their friends; or at least to see them and be seen.

Carriages and riders poured in constant succession into the Park in a dense moving stream, broken only now and then by the blue-coated guardians of the peace to allow a thick mass of pedestrians to cross the teeming road and trickle

slowly away as fancy dictated on either side of the Row.

The north side was comparatively deserted. The south side was clearly the centre of attraction. Here a dense mass of people were congregated; some grouped together in rows and irregular curves upon the light iron chairs which filled up all the centre of the triangular expanse of gravel stretching for at least a third of the way to Albert Gate; others moving slowly along the walks on either side of the phalanx of chairs in a double stream which flowed and ebbed unintermittently; others again reclining against the railings and surveying the whole moving swaying mass of glancing rainbow hues with a critical eye, or standing half in the road to exchange badinage and laughter with the occupants of the carriages which were drawn up in a long line along the south side of the Promenade.

"The Drive" in fact, was crammed with vehicles of every kind. Heavy luxurious carriages, light coquettish victorias, quiet mysterious broughams, all of the latest fashion and make, jostled cheek by jowl with every variety of ancient and incongruous equipage; while ever and anon the long shrill blast of a distant post-horn proclaimed that some member of the Four-in-Hand Club was guiding his high-mettled team through the difficulties of the most trying course in the whole of London. Amid the apparently hopeless chaos of the drive the eye gradually detected a certain order beyond merely that of the rule of the road. There were two distinct lines—an outer one along which the graceful vehicles whirled rapidly to and fro in bewildering

succession; an inner one down by the railings along the edge of the gravel where a slow stream of carriages crawled at a snail's pace working their way step by step an inch at a time up towards Hyde Park Corner.

In the Row itself hundreds of equestrians were pacing up and down in uneven rows or breathing their steeds in a short, sharp scurry over the soft, springy tan. Others were grouped in long ranks at the end watching the stream of carriages which poured in and out at Hyde Park Corner or whirled rapidly by along the road to Stanhope Gate. Others, halted close up to the railings, were engaged in eager conversation with friends among the promenaders.

A dazzling mass of kaleidoscopic colours, a brilliant moving rainbow of soft strange and delicately-blending hues. Such was Rotten Row at six o'clock in the height of the season.

The busy hum of conversation, the ripple of laughter, the rustle of crisp dresses, the thunder of the carriages, and the jingling of the harness, all combined indistinguishably together in that indescribable sound like the roar of a distant ocean which is truly the pulsation of the mighty heart of the great city.

The greatest meeting-place in Europe, in the whole world, perhaps; for every one seems to come to London in June and then they naturally turn their footsteps sooner or later towards the Row. Friends who have bidden each other farewell but a few hours before in the cool air of the early morning ere retiring to the rest which sooner or later

closes in even the longest London evening, meet again under the shadow of the trees to discuss the pleasures of the night just past and the programme of the night to come. Friends whose paths have lain far apart for years till advancing age has frosted their hair and carved with curious wrinkles the faces that once were round and smooth with the freshness of youth, suddenly meet one another again face to face perhaps only to pass by unconscious of the former playmate or lover. Old enemies too who have not met for years, recognise afar the detested visage of their foe and glare defiance and undying hate across the sea of heads till the crowd swallows them up and veils their petty hatred in the vastness of its own joyous personality.

And there they were, all the people we have known, all changed by time and yet so exactly the same. Lady Laura Lyntelle—whose name even you have probably forgotten though I have not—no longer a divinity and a little too palpably "made up," but lively and charming as ever she was seven or eight years ago. Miranda Syrup and her mamma —the latter still looking not a day more than thirty. She might have been taken for her daughter's elder sister much more than her mother, and I felt quite sad that the secret of this marvellous rejuvenescence should not be more generally known. Miranda has not yet caught her prince; and I am much afraid, poor girl! that her chances are diminishing sadly year by year. Already a discontented look is beginning to peep out faintly around the beautiful lips that curved so joyously in merry laughter that memorable summer at Homburg only three years

ago. And who is this tall handsome sun-burnt military-looking man with the fierce black moustache and the soft, sleepy eyes? Can it be young Wing? Yes, it is Wing—no longer "young," but "Victoria Cross Wing" well-known in the Service as "the fellow who did that plucky thing, you know, out in Zululand." He smiles at me in the distance, does Wing, not too great to recognise an old friend even though a mere civilian; but the sight of his pleasant handsome face recalls memories that I would fain forget, and I am glad when he is lost to sight again as he rides slowly by with his companions—a tall handsome fair girl and an ancient *beau* in whom I recognise a great diplomatic light and his only daughter. And there leaning against the railings are Sydney and Jordan, both barristers now and equally briefless though the fact does not seem to affect their powers of enjoyment. They nod and smile to me as I pass and would speak, but I am moody and out with the world and their light chatter jars on me. A few words only and then I continue my lonely prowl; yes, lonely, for I feel so lonely among this crowd of light-hearted pleasure-seekers.

It is three years since we met, dear reader—three long long years—and they seem to me like thirty. Looking back I can hardly believe that three years ago the whole of life lay open before me, unimagined happiness waited but for my will; and now the play is ended entirely, the curtain has fallen heavily, the lights are sinking low, and the dull blank vast of darkness looms closer and closer.

What is life to me now?

A perpetual looking back to the might-have-been, a never-ending struggle not to weary of the weary empty will-be.

It seems almost as though the knife of the secret assassin had struck all the reality out of my life leaving nothing but the mechanism of the body to creak rustily through existence in a soulless, unreal way uninspired by aught approaching volition.

There are so many things that I do because one must do something and they are ready to one's hand; so little that I do because I wish to do it. A huge dark shadow floats before my eyes through which all the manners of this world appear in dingy dismal hues with all the brightness darkened in them, all the sweetness turned to bitter, all the lovableness shrunk to repulsion.

I have been out of mourning for some time but my soul is shrouded in the deepest gloom. My poor loving murdered Mabel! When shall I forget the horrors of that ghastly night?

I have bound myself to vengeance and have done nothing—nothing, and yet so much. The sharpest eyes and the acutest brains in Europe have worked for me; have sifted the tattered shreds of evidence again and again; have followed with wolf-like persistency the faintest shadow of a trail; and have owned themselves beaten and hopeless in the end. A wild legend even has grown out of the impenetrable secrecy in which the assassin enveloped her identity; and scared women with bated breath will tell you now how the devil came down on earth in years gone by and was seen visibly in the guise

of a woman—which provokes sarcastic comment from new-comers of incredulous mind.

At times I burn with impatience of my useless efforts, at times shiver with utter weariness of the hopeless toil:

> "And say at night, 'Would God the day were here;'
> And say at dawn, 'Would God the day were dead.'"

I am haunted by a spectre of vague remorse—almost as though *I* had murdered her, almost as one bearing in secret the brand of Cain on his brow which he hides in sleepless misery from the eyes of the world.

Why? you will say. I do not know. Reason in calmer moods refutes me in my delusion. But ever and anon I feel that in some measure *her* death lies at my door—lies to the blame of my carelessness, too little thought of mine yet thinking overmuch something that I should have done, something that I did too well. All vague, and yet so horrible; vague as the outline of a spectre dimly seen, yet hideous as its shadowy face in the darkness.

What will be the end—the end of my desire?

* * * * *

There comes the Hawthorne carriage with the countess and her grandchild in it. They stop by the railings and I drift slowly towards them. It is some relief in my utter loneliness to gaze at the little face which recalls so exactly the features of my murdered bride, and to listen to the childish,

musical voice in which I seem to hear faint echoes of the past.

The child cries out at once to "Uncle Jack." I am "Uncle Jack" so-called in compromise, for the Hawthornes treat me as a son and I am Bella's guardian should they die.

Strangely indeed runs the current of our talk as I stand by the carriage—not for the first time but never so earnestly before.

"I don't like to see you like this," says the kindly old lady earnestly. "It is not natural in a young man like you. I feel that I can speak to you as no one else can, and can give you advice which would sound unfeeling from others. I know and appreciate your feeling and devotion but I think it is carried too far. No man has a right to dedicate his life to the dead and past for ever; and you have waited a long long time now. If the marriage that we all hoped for had come off, it would have been different; if you had any family to devote yourself to, it would be so different. But I say, and my husband agrees with me, that no one should shut himself up entirely and condemn himself to utter loneliness for a whole life. I know how you loved our dear girl; you know how we loved her. Would I say this to you if it were not right? Would I say it with this dear child's face before me?"

I murmur some words of faint protest, but as I do so the vision of a pair of blue eyes and a childish face rises before me in a setting of dead-gold hair, and though I drive it away imperiously it lingers dimly visible in the distance.

I shut my mind to it. Is it not treason to the dead even to dream of *her*? and yet I know that it is still there.

"Remember," are Lady Hawthorne's parting words to me, "that the best news I can hear of you will be that you have found a solace for your affliction in some nice affectionate girl with whom you can begin your life again. We shall be glad for you and will welcome her gladly."

And so the carriage moves on.

Dear kind Lady Hawthorne!

And, lo! a few yards down the line I discover my little step-mother in her victoria, alone and rather disconsolate. She beckons to me eagerly and I get in, for it will please her and I care little enough.

I am a few years older than her, as you will remember, and she confides in me rather like an elder brother.

There has been a family row, it appears—I am staying with the Hawthornes at present, not with my own people—and the governor has behaved like a bear, and she is very wretched, poor fragile little creature!

So she chatters and even whimpers a little eager for sympathy to salve her wounded heart, and I talk to her as kindly as I can.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" she cries at last, the big eyes growing bigger and more childlike with intense earnestness, "why don't you marry?"

Embarrassed I endeavour to divert the subject.

"But why don't you?" she persists. "Why should you condemn yourself to utter misery for

the rest of your life? It is unnatural, utterly horrid. I don't mean that you should rush at the first girl you see, but give yourself a chance. You might fall in love again——"

"No, no; don't speak of it," I mutter hoarsely.

"But I will," she cries petulantly. "Am I not your mama? and it would be so nice to have a daughter to sympathize with one when papa is sulky."

"But supposing she didn't," I suggest half-smiling at the unconscious selfishness thus revealed.

"But she would," with the utmost conviction. "If she were nice, why shouldn't she? Even *you* do."

She drives home at last quite prepared to tackle the governor and impressing on me at parting that it is my duty to marry for her sake.

And as I turn away with a faint smile I draw back just in time to avoid being run over by a victoria sweeping along at a reckless pace in defiance of Park regulations. In it is a showy overdressed and dreadfully painted woman, whom to my astonishment I recognise as she passes within a yard of me as the once quiet and ladylike Eva Archer. Utterly astounded I fell back forgetting all about a salute. Eva however only stared fixedly at me without bowing, and even turned deliberately round when her carriage had dashed past in order to continue her immodest and insolent scrutiny.

It was the perfection of bad taste, the *acmé* of the cut direct. To say that I was astonished at such extraordinary insolence, is to put it very mildly.

This encounter gave me an unpleasant shock. It was the breaking of delusions, the stripping of the cloak that hides the skeleton. It brought back to me uneasily a host of half-forgotten thoughts. I felt, with a tremor of horror that perhaps I had now seen Eva for the first time in her true character—a bold adroit and shameless hussy who would stand at nothing if the stakes were high enough. It came upon me as a revelation—a bolt from the blue could not have appalled me more.

And where was Archer?

There was a man, or rather a boy, lolling lazily in the victoria at her side, but no Archer.

What had become of him?

Had she——? But no, I drove away the thought half-formed. It was too utterly horrible. Had I lingered over it I believe I should have gone mad.

I was aroused from my sombre dream by a familiar voice, and turning round I found myself face to face with dear old Tottenham.

I wrung his hand with heartfelt cordiality. We had not met for years—not since that memorable summer at Homburg that you wot of.

He was in town for a week it appeared, alone and on business—the kind of business which consists chiefly in delaying and doing nothing, so that though there is so little it takes so long to get through.

Where was Nellie? How was she?

She had not been at all well for some time and they were very anxious about her. The doctor had not been able to make anything of her and had

hinted at some affair of the heart. But this was so utterly unlikely because she had never shown any special liking for any one. Besides they would have consented to almost anything rather than she should suffer. It was a mystery. Questioning did no good: she only smiled mournfully and said there was nothing the matter. Months had gone by and matters seemed no better. They thought of taking her abroad but she positively refused to go; or to London but that she wouldn't hear of either. It was a terrible anxiety to them, but they literally didn't know what to do.

"If you were a true friend, my boy," he concluded, "you would come back with me and try and cheer her up a bit. She always liked you, you know, and the change might do her good. And it would do you no end of good too," he added meaningly looking me straight in the face. "I don't like to see you looking so pale and haggard. It's not natural."

"But——" I began weakly to protest.

"I know what you are going to say," he answered. "Better not. There are some things which must be forgotten. It is three years now. Surely you can begin life afresh. I am sure even her parents, even she herself, poor dear thing——"

"Yes," I replied; "they say as you do, and she——. I know she loved me even to the uttermost. But I cannot forget. It has taken all the heart out of my life."

"That is because you give way entirely and mope yourself to death alone. You should come out into the world again. As an old friend I ask

you, nay, I insist on your coming home with me next week."

In the end he prevailed—was it not too much in accordance with my secret inclination, and were they not all against me? I consented. More than that, I consented to go to the theatre with him that evening, and took him off to dine at the club.

Truly he seemed like an angel of brightness bursting through the darkness of my soul.

On the way I inquired if he had heard anything of the Archers lately—I had almost lost sight of everybody—and if they were in town.

"No," he replied; "they are in Paris. But they are coming over shortly and will be with us by the end of the week."

"You are sure Mrs. Archer is not in town at present?" I hinted.

"No, I am not sure. But it is very unlikely."

There was evidently some mystery at work. The most obvious solution was that I hadn't seen Eva at all but some woman very like her. But I could hardly persuade myself to believe it.

CHAPTER XIII.

"QUITE GROWN-UP NOW."

In a week we were once more at Greylands.

Mrs. Tottenham, more portly and majestic than ever, received me with enthusiasm and yet with such tender care for my feelings. Not a word did she breathe of the long time which had elapsed since she saw me last, not a reminiscence of our last meeting. And yet perhaps that very forbearance pained me more than any words could have done—it was so eloquent in silence.

And Nellie?

The same oval face, the same great loving lustrous blue eyes, the same inquisitive little turned-up nose, but that was all. It was no longer a child's face now, but the face of a girl about to develop into an extremely beautiful woman, though she appeared wholly unconscious of the change herself. The tawny mane which had floated in wild luxuriance over her shoulders was now plaited and coiled neatly at the back of her head. Her figure was slim graceful and perfectly formed. She wore a white cotton all-round dress bound round her

slender waist by a broad white band and reaching to her ankles. On her head was a little straw yachting hat with a band of white ribbon gathered into a huge rosette in front.

She was quite grown up now, that was clear, and the change was all for the better. And yet I could not help regretting the pretty child I had known and loved in the bright summer days long ago.

There was a smile of welcome on her lips; but her face was very pale, poor Nellie! and there were dark rings round her eyes that looked doubly sad in one so young. Life should have been to her but just beginning, and she seemed already to have tasted far more of the bitter than the sweet.

She welcomed me as an old friend, and yet almost as she did so a slight shadow of timidity came over her, a slender barrier of maidenly reserve seemed to rise up between us, and I knew that the old days of our childish friendships were gone never to return.

I felt my heart grow sad within me.

Why did she look so pale and mournful? Could it be that her heart had already suffered when she was as yet but on the threshold of life, and if so who could have caused this suffering? An inexpressible feeling of anger rose up in my soul against the man who could trifle with one so innocent, who could treat thus lightly a love which was above all price.

And yet, what could it matter to me, save that the child was sweet and lovable and that I would have done aught that lay in my power to shield her from suffering?

I inquired for Mumbo.

A glad light came once more into Nellie's eyes, and her lips twinkled with merry laughter as they had twinkled long ago.

"Then you haven't forgotten him? Dear old Mumbo! To think of your remembering my old dog."

She took me to see him, and became almost her own merry self again, as she danced out into the garden laughing and making the echoes of the silent coombe ring with musical calls of "Mumbo, Mumbo! come here, sir!"

She began even to lecture me severely for not having come to see her before, declared that I was positively horrid to have kept away so long, and that I might consider myself in disgrace until I had atoned for my reprehensible conduct by being unusually good. Then a great fear seized on her that she might have offended or hurt me, and she looked up into my face with such a remorseful piteous expression that I quite felt for her, and throwing off my melancholy exerted myself to talk and laugh for her sake till I was quite surprised to find that we could be very merry together still if we only tried.

And then at last we found the missing Mumbo, or rather he found us, for he galloped down upon us unexpectedly, barking violently and dancing round us till legs tail ears and everything seemed to be all in the air at once and he looked like some fabulous animal on a sign-board.

This it appeared was partly in honour of his mistress, partly in honour of me, and might be considered as a proof that he remembered me, for

he hated visitors as a rule and was sometimes inclined to be made rude even offensive to them.

He concluded his vagaries by rolling over and over with considerable fury, puffing and snorting in an alarming sort of way. This however Nellie assured me was a further proof of extreme good-humour.

Finally he rolled at his mistress's feet, and then put up his great head with a long red tongue dangling out of his mouth in the full expectation of being kissed and hugged—as he duly was.

I thought Mumbo a most enviable dog,—no wonder he was haughty and offensive to visitors.

It was a pretty picture indeed. The graceful fragile girl, fondling the huge powerful brute. A painter would have grasped the idea at once and never rested till he had rendered it immortal.

"Hasn't he grown a beauty?" she inquired at last. "You love." The last words were to Mumbo.

"Yes," I replied abstractedly as though after careful consideration.

"And he's so clever. He can do all sorts of things—you've no idea. Can't you, my pet?" The latter words were of course addressed to Mumbo, who evinced his entire agreement by wagging as much of his tail as he was not using as a seat, and making wild attempts to lick his mistress's face.

"Ye-es, I sup—pose so," I remarked again as though the subject were really weighty enough to require some thought. I wasn't thinking of him at all. I was watching the play of the dimples in her cheek, the waving feathery fringe that danced

most bewilderingly over her eyes, and the tiny fingers clasped round the neck of that too fortunate and stupidly unappreciative Mumbo—he absolutely I believe wanted to get away.

"Whatever *are* you thinking about?" cried Nellie looking up suddenly and I suppose catching the thoughtful expression of my face.

"You!" I replied, surprised into speaking my real thoughts. "I was thinking that you will soon be a woman of the world, Nellie, and a beautiful woman run after by everybody and living in a perpetual round of pleasure. That's what coming out will mean to you, little friend of the long ago. And then, and then, ah! then Nellie, you will tire of your childhood's friends and favourites; you won't care for Mumbo, and poor old Jack Buchanan will be soon forgotten in the pleasures of your new life."

A cruel heartless foolish speech.

And yet the discovery that she was entering womanhood and that the happy days of childish friendships were drawing nigh to a close, came upon me as a very disagreeable surprise. Of course with the wonderful promise that she gave she would develop into a great beauty whose favour would be sought far and wide. It would be only natural that the playmates of her childhood should drift aside and be lost to her sight in the full flood-tide of pleasure. I ought to have expected it. Why should it surprise me?

And then some day she would marry——

No, that thought was more than I could endure. Nellie married! bound to some man in an indissoluble union of body and soul. No, that I could

not bear to think of. I felt that if it were to be so, I could never look upon her face again. The mere idea of it stung me to the very soul with a pang which I had never dreamt of before. The reality would be too horrible. And yet I knew some day it must be so! of course she would marry! Why should she not, in Heaven's name?

I pictured to myself her husband, — Nellie's husband!!

A vision of a black-browed black-hearted scoundrel, who would win her innocent love only to despise it and weary of it, and would lead her a dog's life when the first spell of her fascinations had melted away.

How I should hate him!!

Leagues of ocean must divide us for all eternity, or—— But such thoughts were madness and the end was not yet at hand.

She was not angry at my outburst. She did not even blush with real or assumed confusion as most girls would have thought it necessary to do. Her face grew pale and sad again, she dropped her eyes to the ground, and with lips that quivered slightly as if with subdued emotion she murmured earnestly, —almost as though speaking to herself.

"No, no, Jack! That day will never come— never."

She was strangely silent, almost sad after this; and though we remained some time in the garden, she answered little but monosyllables in a low almost shy tone, while her fingers wandered restlessly twining and untwining again and again in Mumbo's long silky fur.

Suddenly however her father's voice was heard calling her, and in a flash she was a child again.

She sprang up much to the dog's delight.

"Now then, Jack," she cried gleefully, "a race—I'll get there first. One, two, three and away." And she was off like lightning, with Mumbo leaping and dancing round her barking violently.

CHAPTER XIV.

PUZZLED DECIDEDLY.

The Archers arrived next day but at different times. Eva, it appeared, had been staying in Town for about a week with an American friend who was in London for the season, while Archer had gone home to see how matters were going on there. It appeared in fact that Eva was actually in London just about the same time as Tottenham if he had only known of it, and we might have brought her down.

This was a very disagreeable shock to me, for I remembered with great misgivings the singular meeting in the Row.

Archer arrived first, and it was from him that we heard all this. I must confess I looked forward to his wife's advent with considerable anxiety.

Well, she arrived.

The same quiet dignified ladylike woman whom I had known and admired at Homburg, with the same reserved haughty manner to the world, the same submission and devotion to her husband. Her skin was as clear and fresh and creamy as if she

were still eighteen. There was not the faintest suspicion of artificiality in the warm colouring of her cheeks. The sparkle in her brilliant eyes was nature's own gift so different from the fixed and hideous stare produced by belladonna. Her dress was quietness and neatness personified and yet the perfection of cut and style.

A tailor-made tweed dress of the latest fashion, a deer-stalker hat to match, high boots of the most approved shape, and a smart ulster over her arm—the whole as expressive of the word "Redfern" as if it had been stamped in large letters outside the cloth. It seemed utterly inconceivable that I could ever have confused her with the showy over-dressed painted hussy I had seen flaunting in the Park but a few days before.

And yet I was obliged to admit that if some spirit of devilry had prompted this very Mrs. Archer to daub her handsome face with red and white, to shade her eyelashes with Indian ink, to anoint her eyes with belladonna, and to dress in imitation of the *demi-monde*, there would not have been a pin to choose between her and the hussy in question; and it is extremely probable that any one but her own husband might have had considerable difficulty in distinguishing her from her undesirable double.

Somehow, I could not drive away the haunting doubt that hung round me persistently that perhaps after all it was not a case of mistaken identity, that my first thoughts were the best.

If so, she must be a consummate actress however, for she welcomed me with a cordial smile and openly regretted that she had not known of our presence

in London, even wondered that she had not seen us about.

Could it possibly be that she had really not recognised me on that occasion, that she had forgotten me so entirely, and had only been attracted by my stare?

And if so, what was she doing? Why was she disguised in that way? Who was that boy?

There seemed but one answer, and the indictment it conveyed was black indeed.

It was utterly impossible, I repeated again and again to myself. Nothing would convince me that those innocent-looking eyes could be the same as the hard cruel orbs that had stared at me so shamelessly, that this quiet modest beautiful exterior was but a mask which hid the fiend within. I was determined that I would not believe it and by sheer persistency I persuaded myself that I didn't.

I sat next to her at dinner and I really devoted myself to the task of drawing her out. I was curious to discover her true character which I knew very little of; for in the old days I remembered that her words and ideas were but faint echoes of her husband. Rarely had she committed herself to any opinion in advance of his; rarely too was she visible without him at her side.

I soon discovered that she had been highly educated. She exhibited an originality and daring in her opinions which was interesting and amusing.

If she had been the usual type of unsexed and spectacled student it would have tasked my patience pretty considerably to listen to her views. But the most dangerous and ridiculous opinions

acquire piquancy when uttered by red pouting lips and pointed by the glance of bright sparkling eyes. Besides it was quite obvious that this petticoated sage had no real aspirations after women's rights;—she laughed too much over the subject, and her adoration of her husband was too complete for equality to be anything but a mockery in her case. To the casual observer however her ideas might have seemed very far advanced, even alarming at times.

She puzzled me I must confess. She was so gentle and musical in her denunciations of the tyranny of man, so laughing and sparkling when she bewailed the wrongs of her sex, so utterly conscious while she preached the higher mission of woman that her own mission was to adorn and be adorned and that she would fit no other so well,—altogether it was the strangest contradiction in the world to compare the sentiments and the speaker.

Had I shut my eyes I could have believed her capable of anything; but with them open, the difficulty was to believe that she believed in herself.

Later I found Nellie standing in the verandah gazing dreamily out at the night. The moon was shining brilliantly and casting its soft subdued light over sea and shore and hill. Far away down in the cove the smooth waters shone like a mirror of burnished silver. A supreme silence filled the air, broken only by the hum of some huge stag-beetle or the whir of a bat flitting by on its nocturnal chase.

The bright rays fell on Nellie's pale upturned

face, investing her with almost supernatural beauty. I felt my whole soul stirred as it had never been before. Come what may, I felt that I must dive into the deep waters of the past, must throw the clear light of truth on one dark passage of my life and hers.

I talked to her of Homburg.

She was nervous at first, poor child, afraid of wounding me, afraid of she knew not what perhaps, but I talked calmly and my calmness gave her courage.

"Have you seen young Wing lately?" I inquired at last unconcernedly.

"Not since we were in Homburg," she replied as calmly as possible.

"Good-looking fellow, he was," I remarked deceitfully, with the view of drawing her out.

"Yes, he was very good-looking," she agreed in the same impassive tone.

"I thought he was a friend of yours, Nellie, and perhaps you might like to hear——"

"Why, have you seen him?"

"No, not to speak to; but I found out that I knew some friends of his, and they tell me he is in England again and——"

"To tell the truth," replied Nellie in the ordinary tone of one who is discussing some unimportant topic, say the weather, "he *was* a friend of mine. I can hardly say he is one now."

"Oh!" was all I felt equal to utter. Then it was not Wing who she was pining for. It was not his absence that had driven the colour from her cheek.

"No, we quarrelled. I feel sorry about it sometimes, for I liked him at first, and he was very kind to me when I did not know many people. I don't know what we should have done without him after you had left the place. You were our great friend, you know—you and Mr. Leigh," she added hurriedly as though the latter name were an afterthought.

"And yet at one time the good folks at Homburg thought you liked him more than a little, Nellie. Do you remember how you danced with him at your first dance?"

"Yes, but that was really all a mistake. I promised him at first three dances only and they were to be at the beginning. But then I was so afraid that I should not dance except with boys,—because you know you went off with mama, and you were—I mean I thought you would not condescend to dance with a child like me,—that I was silly enough to promise to give him a dance for every real man he introduced me to."

"Oh, that accounts for his energy in introducing."

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, he introduced me to so many people that if I had kept my promise exactly my card would have been all Mr. Wing."

"G. W.," I interposed.

"Yes, G. W., and so I limited him to three more. He said it was not fair but that was ridiculous. I did not want to dance all the evening with a boy like that; I would much rather have danced with—the Baron von Bierbrunnen—or any one by way of a change."

Was I mistaken, or did Nellie hesitate a little before mentioning the baron's name? And why did a pretty pinky flush of colour steal gently over her soft cheek, as she dropped her head just sufficiently to conceal her eyes from my gaze?

What was the name which had sprung to her lips so naturally only to be rejected at once?

"Yes, the baron was a charming man, I remember. *He* certainly was a real man," I continued.

"Yes, I suppose he was; but he danced at such a rate that he whirled me completely off my legs. I don't think I exactly touched the ground once during the whole dance; and when we stopped at last I was so giddy that I nearly fell down. I was quite thankful then that my card was full."

Then she had not intended to name the baron!

"You must have enjoyed yourself very much that night."

"Oh no, I didn't at all."

"Didn't enjoy yourself?"

"No, I hated it. I had looked forward to it so, and then it turned out so different. I never went to another."

"I thought you were enjoying yourself immensely."

"Well, I did at first," she acknowledged; "it was all so new; but everything went wrong somehow, it was entirely different from what I had expected, and I went away quite early, before the cotillon. But of course you don't remember what I did."

"Yes, I do," I replied, with an energy which

startled me. "I remember everything you did—only too well."

The pinky flush again stole over her cheek and again she drooped her head. I would have given the world to be able to read her thoughts.

"What are you people discussing so eagerly?" said the voice of Archer, who came out followed closely by Eva. In my momentary irritation at this interruption I permitted myself to descend to the thought that Eva seemed afraid to trust him out of her sight for a minute.

"We were talking about Homburg."

"Oh," said Archer doubtfully. I suppose he considered it a difficult subject. "Ah, yes! exactly."

Eva slipped her arm gently under her husband's and clasping her hands looked at me inquiringly. I was angry, I admit, unreasonably angry with them for coming out; but I must record the fact that this action seemed to my excited fancy almost like a mute defiance. "If you strike at me, you must strike through him," it seemed to say; and yet Heaven knows I had entirely rejected as utterly impossible my hasty suspicions of her.

My calmer judgment, however, persuaded me that the action was harmless and natural enough—exactly in accordance with her character.

"Have you seen that Mr. Leigh lately?" inquired Eva. The tone was indifferent enough; but when a woman describes a man as "that" Mr. Leigh, it is ten to one that he is not a favourite of hers.

"No, not lately," I replied. "It is a curious thing but in spite of his roving propensities he

never comes to London. And I have been a hermit so long."

"We saw him last year at Vienna," said Archer. "He inquired most anxiously after you. I told him what I knew, that you kept at home now, and he seemed very much cut up to hear about it all. I never saw a man look so cut up in my life. I declare I thought he was going to cry like a girl. He must have been very fond of you."

"Poor old Gordon! Yes, I believe he was, and I must say I took to him uncommonly."

"Strange chap, he was," continued Archer. "Don't you remember how he used to potter about reading and talking politics to old Lord Hawthorne or *beau*ing Mrs. Tottenham about and standing any amount of chaff from you and me and those two Oxford fellows, and then what a little demon he suddenly flared up into when that Yankee insulted him!"

"Mama and I liked him," murmured Nellie; "he was so quiet and gentlemanly to us and always ready to be obliging. But I know he had a temper of his own; there was one person he couldn't bear."

"Who?" I inquired.

"Oh, no one in particular," stammered the girl in great confusion. "I really forget exactly, it is so long ago and I can't be certain."

Slightly mystified but anxious not to worry her I asked no more. Besides, a vague idea occurred to me that Nellie must be referring to poor Mabel and her confusion was on my account.

"I didn't much like him," remarked Eva. "He

always gave me the idea that he was playing a part, that his quietness and gentleness were all assumed. There was a dangerous flash in his eyes at times which to my mind spoke volumes."

"What was he doing at Vienna?" I said, evading that question; for I knew well that if Eva disliked him she would of course see dangerous flashes in his eyes with the greatest ease and anything else that struck her fancy.

"He appeared to be hand and glove with a Hungarian count. They were always riding or driving or walking arm-in-arm together, and in fact were as inseparable as—as—as Eva and myself, say," he concluded with a smile.

"Who was the count?"

"I forget. Do you remember, Eva?"

"Count Tekeli, I think," she replied.

"Tekeli! Tekeli! I seem to know that name. Oh, yes, I remember now, the man who shot himself at Monte Carlo,—you know I always feel a morbid interest in Monte Carlo! It was the usual story: a tall dark handsome woman, a short spell of reckless extravagance, a run of luck against him, ruin and suicide."

"A tall dark handsome woman!" said Archer reflectively. "There always seems to be a tall dark handsome woman in these matters."

"I am sure fair women are just as bad as dark," pouted Eva bridling a little.

"I know what you mean," I replied. "I sent a private detective at once to make inquiries but he found out nothing. I should almost have thought he had been got at, but it seemed such a very

unlikely thing that he would have no story ready if he had been; all he said was that she had disappeared leaving no trace whatever."

"Very extraordinary; confirms the idea."

"Yes," I said solemnly; "but it cannot go on for ever. Call me mad if you like, moonstruck, dazed by sorrow, but I feel, I know that I am an instrument in the hands of destiny and that some day I shall meet this woman face to face to exact a heavy account of her crimes."

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT THE NIGHT BROUGHT FORTH.

An eventful day, followed by a still more eventful night! Shall I ever forget it?

For a long time as it seemed to my slumbering faculties—it might have been years, centuries, nay, æons of time, or as it most probably was a couple of hours—I lay in a heavy stertorous uncomfortable sleep of the kind which brings no rest to the body no relief to the mind. The hidden part of man still reflects all the weariness which the body has incurred and suffers vainly hoping for peace.

Vague fitful visions float uncertainly through the troubled drowsy imagination. Another act of the strange double life which we mortals lead on earth is unsatisfactorily gone through without result or even *dénoûment.* And at the end the unhappy wight wakes with aching eyes and throbbing brow and a general feeling that he would like to slumber away for ever if only that dreadful clanging breakfast-bell would cease its hideous uproar.

Under this strange influence I tossed and tumbled on my uneasy couch in all the restless fretful emotion which such slumbers bring, without a connected thought approaching the weird chaos of deformed ideas and shapeless memories in which my mind was aimlessly whirling.

Gradually however my brain became calmer, my body ceased to distract itself in wild unwholesome movements, my thoughts gradually strung themselves together in links nay whole chains of connected meaning, and then at last I dreamed a strange weird dream.

This was my dream.

I thought that I was gazing earnestly into the depths of a huge white cloud that heaved and rolled uneasily as though under the influence of some mighty powerful wind. But as I looked into it strange dark spots seemed to arise suddenly out of it in the most singular way until the whole surface was studded all over with tiny black ever-moving dots. Then I noticed that two of these dots seemed to be growing larger and larger and assuming a distinct shape yet such a shape as I had never seen before nor could give name to. And as I watched this bewildering phenomenon the cloud itself seemed as it were to grow gradually clearer and more transparent, so that at last faint outlines of a ragged disconnected nature became dimly visible through the gauzy veil.

The clearing process, which I can only compare to the gradual settling down of the sediment in muddy water after some disturbance, continued steadily; the outlines became more and more dis-

tinct and connected; the two black spots in the centre became larger and more defined; until at last, as the faint vapours of the cloud melted finally away, I saw before me as in a picture and yet with all the startling reality of a *tableau vivant* the following scene.

The long curving coast-line of a beautiful bay unfolded itself before my eyes with the gradual movement of a huge panorama. With the singular duplexity of vision peculiar to dreamers my eyes seemed to travel over the whole expanse of the smiling landscape and yet at the same time to remain firmly fixed on what I felt sure by some mysterious instinct was the central point—a cluster of high grey cliffs rising to a great height sheer out of the tossing sea and crested all along their lofty summits with dull green.

Then with indefinable expansion the central point grew larger, while the outlying parts of the picture appeared to fade slowly and gradually away; and the whole floated nearer, nearer, nearer, till I could see the sharp rocks projecting from the steep face of the cliffs, the rough grass growing on the summit, and the—yes, there were actually people walking on the downs.

Then a feeling of great terror came over me, and even in my sleep an icy thrill shot to my heart, my blood curdled in my veins, and my hair bristled upright on the pillow.

I felt that I was on the verge of some awful revelation, something unknown and terrible; and the horror of an unspeakable invisible presence, I knew not what, came upon me. It seemed almost

as though this indefinable feeling obscured my mental vision for the moment; for the picture suddenly blurred and the outlines melted one into another like a reflection seen in rippling waters. It passed away from my mind, however, as quickly as it came, leaving nothing but an intense desire to see the end, a vague yearning curiosity that was half expectation half fear.

In obedience to the change the picture cleared again with marvellous rapidity. While under the influence of the same strange magnifying and diminishing process which I had noticed before it became gradually smaller in circumference, though the details grew and grew and grew to a life-like size till I felt as though I were actually standing within twenty feet of the edge of the cliffs.

Then two figures appeared suddenly standing there where the sheer steep rock sank precipitously into the sea, two figures—a man and a woman.

Again the feeling of shuddering horror fell on me and for the moment the picture heaved and tossed like the surface of a troubled sea.

I knew what was coming now!

I was near enough to recognise every detail of the woman's costume. There were the yachting cap, the red parasol, the blue dress, and white waistcoat, exactly as I had seen them through the glasses eight years ago out there on the downs above Greylands.

The woman of the murder was now before me!

Her face was turned from me, but I could see that her dark hair was twined in a knot at the back of her head, and that the graceful curves of

her body betokened the most exquisite symmetry and suppleness of limb.

Need I go on?

You can guess what followed. You can guess the dreadful shriek which rent the air as the woman turned in sudden fury and hurled the man over the cliff into the yawning gulf below. The whole horrible drama of the murder was enacted with life-like reality before me, and I, a helpless horrified spectator, lay spell-bound unable to break the unnatural torpor which numbed my limbs.

For some time the woman remained gazing downwards as if held by some terrible attraction. Then suddenly she turned and looked straight into my eyes so that I could see every feature of her face with wonderful distinctness.

What a marvellous face it was!

The large dark lustrous orbs seemed to penetrate to my very soul, and in their fathomless depths there lurked a piteous despairing look of terror and misery that told of unutterable horror and fear. The dark wavy shining hair, the dazzling white of her complexion, the full red lips just parted and disclosing the pearly teeth within, all made up a picture of exquisite beauty that reminded me irresistibly of——Why God in heaven it is!—Eva Archer herself!

And with the words vibrating on my lips in a shrill scream of horror I awoke.

I spare you the record of my feelings on recalling my dream amid the murky darkness of the room, or the legion of grinning gibbering figures which my nervous fancy evoked in shadowy corners,

ere sleep once more overtook me. Suffice it to say that at last my weary frame composed itself once more to sleep.

Not so my mind.

Strung as it were to the highest tension of memory it recalled with marvellous fidelity the whole scene I had just witnessed. Again as she turned towards me I saw the face of Eva Archer, and again awoke with the shrill cry of horror on my lips and a shuddering chill at my heart.

Three times altogether in that one night did I witness this terrible spectacle, and three times did I recognise my friend's adored wife as the murderess.

The last vision was carried even further in detail than the other. Not only was I able to scrutinise closely every line of the face and figure and compare them in my mind with the original, but I even recognised a peculiarity which I had specially remarked in Eva on different occasions. For as I gazed steadily into the dream-woman's face, suddenly she started back and covering her face with her hands ran rapidly away. Then I noticed that she moved with the same serpentine undulating grace and freedom which compared so favourably with the scuttling sort of jog-trot of most women.

Then the picture melted slowly away and I remember no more till the morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON DELICATE GROUND.

The first thing which occurred to me when I awoke was the dream. I remembered it too vividly to have any doubts as to its reality. The question was:—was there any meaning in it, or was it only one of the extraordinary vagaries which puzzle the wisest heads to explain with regard to dreams?

Certainly it was very odd that every time I had met Eva Archer I had been troubled by a nightmare which seemed as it were to expand and become more definite on each successive repetition. There was not the slightest doubt in my mind now that the three separate illusions were really all identical in incident, only I had been unable hitherto to remember more than a small fraction of the whole.

Was it possible that it could be true?

Was it possible that Eva, so gentle, so beautiful, so timid, could really be the guilty creature my suspicions pointed to?

What a hideous gulf of deceit and crime the very idea seemed to open up!

The stories of her early life, her youthful innocence and inexperience, her supposed ignorance of all countries but America, her very birth nationality and parentage,—all, all, must be a mere tissue of falsehood woven craftily to hide a past career of Heaven only knew what untold blackness.

And then there was Archer to be considered. He believed in her implicitly, he almost worshipped her with a loving devoted affection which I had never seen before.

How would he receive my revelation?

Was it possible that it could be true?

My whole soul seemed to rise in protest against it.

And yet—! And yet—!

I had a dim recollection that the description of the murderess was really very like Eva.

The best thing would be to hunt Tottenham up and try and get the old papers out of him without arousing his suspicions. If there was anything in them which seemed to confirm my dream, well! If not, I could put it down very easily to a combination of bad health and a strange jumble of recollections.

I dressed as quickly as possible and went to find Tottenham. He was reading the *Western Morning News* in the study.

After a few desultory remarks I led the conversation to the murder and asked him point-blank if any clue had ever been found.

None whatever, it appeared, and the subject was almost entirely forgotten.

Had he still got the handkerchief? was my next question.

Oh yes, and the paper with the description as well. He believed it was somewhere upstairs. Did I want to see it?

And so the end was that we went up to his dressing-room; and after examining a number of drawers and predicting several times that it was lost, he eventually discovered the missing articles in a secret cupboard of a large oak cabinet.

"Here it is," said Tottenham handing me a packet.

I opened it curiously and examined the handkerchief.

I thought somehow that the monogram seemed strangely familiar to me, that I had seen it somewhere lately. Where could I have seen it?

Then suddenly it flashed through my mind that this was the identical monogram which I had noticed on Eva's locket at Homburg and which I had completely forgotten for so long.

My worst suspicions seemed confirmed.

Moreover, her name was Eva. That accounted for the E. What were her other names? That I must find out first of all.

I read over the faded writing. Certainly the description was strangely like Eva. She was tall dark handsome with aquiline features and dark eyes. She had a perfect figure and moved with extraordinary grace. Still it would apply to many other women no doubt. I must be careful very careful.

"Will you lend me this?" I inquired nervously. "I should like to make a copy of it."

"To be sure!" he replied laughing. "But I

don't think it is much use raking up the story; no further clue has been discovered."

I put the paper and handkerchief in my pocket. Had no further clue been obtained? I hoped not, but I dreaded what the future might bring forth.

The first sound that I heard on entering the breakfast-room was Eva's voice. Her face was turned away from me, and I stood spell-bound for a minute staring at her. The resemblance was something extraordinary. There was the shapely head I had seen in my dream at first with the face averted; and when at the noise of our entry she moved round till her eyes met mine, I saw as I had expected and feared the marvellous face of the dream-woman feature for feature to the very smallest detail.

I sank into a chair completely overcome. My breakfast was spoilt for that morning. I had no more appetite than if I had just eaten a hearty meal.

Of course I had to run the gauntlet of the usual jokes on the subject; but some of my trouble must have crept into my face for Archer inquired anxiously if I felt ill.

I protested of course that there was nothing the matter with me, that I had never been better!—and tried to eat something to prove it, but the attempt was a dismal failure.

My mind was too full.

I wanted to be alone to be able to think.

Glad was I in consequence when breakfast was over and I could escape to the garden.

Once alone, I thought the matter carefully over.

If it should be true!—if it should be true!

What a hideous possibility these words pointed

to! And yet if it were not, what an idiot I should make of myself if I said anything about the dream!

What was I to do? The matter was too important and dangerous to risk anything by acting precipitately. The amount at stake was positively terrific. I felt my hair bristling upright with horror at the very thought.

I remained for at least an hour considering but, without coming to any conclusion. Ideas floated vaguely through my brain for some time, but no definite course of action suggested itself to me.

At last I took out my pocket-book, tore out a sheet, and jotted down all the circumstances which appeared to me to bear on the inquiry. After much thought I decided that it would be best to try and draw Eva herself quietly out on the subject of the locket and ascertain if the initials were hers or not. Then I might mark the handkerchief privately and show it to her. If she were guilty she would probably be startled and might betray herself. Anyhow, she might acknowledge it as hers and that would be a point settled.

Chance gave me the opportunity in the afternoon.

Archer was playing tennis but his wife complained of a headache and refused to play.

I purposely declined as well and sat out waiting till there was an opening for speaking to her alone.

She wandered off into the shrubberies, and after a decent interval I left the other girls and followed her.

I dare say they made no end of ill-natured jokes on the subject when I was well out of hearing.

I found her sitting in a shady arbour quite alone.

She made a very pretty picture in her loose white cotton dress confined to the waist by a wide crimson band. She had taken off her broad white straw hat and was swinging it dreamily by the crimson ribbons. Her head was drooping a little as though she was tired of her own society. And there she sat framed as it were amid the dark recesses of the arbour.

She raised her head as my step sounded on the gravel.

There was the locket on her bosom. Yes, there was no doubt of it. The monogram was identical with that on the handkerchief. I felt a thrill of fury run through my whole frame. But I must be calm. Craft must be met by craft.

After a few meaningless remarks, I opened the campaign cautiously.

"A pretty locket, that of yours?" I suggested by way of leading up to the subject.

"Yes, it is pretty; and curious too," she replied. "Do you know there is quite a romantic story attached to it, I believe? It was made out of a nugget of real Californian gold in the early days of the mining fever."

"I suppose by some successful digger for his sweetheart?" I hazarded. "Were her initials L. E. N.?"

"Well, no!" she laughed back; "those are my initials. But you are right about the locket. And as far as I remember the story wound up with a terrible *dénoûment* in which the miner-lover eventually stabbed the girl he loved believing that she was faithless to him. The initials were put on

later for me," she added, her brow clouding a little and her eyes growing moist at some recollection connected with the locket, I suppose.

"Tell me, Mr. Buchanan," she continued, "do you think it can ever be justifiable to take the life of a fellow-creature?"

A singular question indeed! What did it portend?

"Certainly I do!" I replied warmly. "The law you know allows it in self-defence, and there are also certain cases in which though technically the act would amount to murder yet the punishment would be only nominal."

"I suppose those cases would arise where the provocation was extremely great?"

"Yes, that is exactly it. For instance, cannibalism in a shipwreck."

"Yes, but," she murmured, beginning to draw circles and figures on the gravel with the point of her crimson parasol, "it seems to me so difficult to settle what exactly is the kind of provocation which would justify one in killing a human being. There are many cases in which the provocation is really the worst that can possibly be offered—especially with regard to women,—and where the unfortunate victim is hardly in her right mind for the moment. Don't you think, Mr. Buchanan, that the desire for revenge would be so great that with most women it would be a mere question of opportunity whether at that instant they did not murder their betrayer? And yet the law would not regard this as provocation at all, and would punish the miserable victim not the real offender."

"Yes, I agree with you," I assented.

"Imagine now," she continued, with her eyes still fixed on her parasol, "to take something very dreadful;—imagine that a man had ruined some unhappy woman, perhaps by violence, perhaps merely by delusive promises, and then getting tired of her determined to rid himself of the encumbrance by casting her adrift on the world,—that world which he himself had turned to hatred scorn and contempt for her. I am sure that if that woman had a weapon within her reach when he first told her his determination,—no doubt, too, he would tell it cruelly with words of bitter insult!—her first impulse would be to lay him dead at her feet, and I firmly believe that the act under the circumstances would be justifiable."

I wondered, as I listened to her and watched her earnest mobile face, whether she was telling her own story. I knew enough of Archer to be sure that he would have agreed with her, shocked and grieved though he might be at the confession.

But then the confession ought to have come earlier. She should have confided in her lover ere she married him. She should not have basely deceived him with an appearance of innocence and married him under false colours. No, I knew he would never forgive that.

Then an idea struck me. Perhaps she *had* told him. That was a notion that required attention.

I determined to test her sharply.

"Or imagine," I said, "that some devoted husband discovered suddenly that the wife he trusted in had grossly deceived him, that she had represented

herself to him as an innocent girl when she really was a guilty woman? Don't you think that his first impulse in the frenzy of the hideous discovery would be to take her by the throat and crush the life out of her as if she were a noxious reptile?"

I watched her face steadily all through to try and catch the slightest expression of terror. But I was miserably disappointed.

"What a horrible idea!" she ejaculated, raising her eyes and looking me straight in the face without any emotion perceptible in her face but astonishment and perhaps a slight tincture of disgust. "I can't imagine any woman being so utterly base as that."

"Can't you?" I replied somewhat bitterly. "I don't believe that there is any baseness which has not been reached at some time by the human race. Why the papers teem with cases which are really no worse than the one I have described. The usual difference is, that the deception comes after instead of before marriage."

"Yes, and that is just the important point," she returned very earnestly. "A woman would hardly venture to run the risk you describe, unless she was quite certain that her guilt could never come to her husband's ears afterwards, and it is impossible to say that with any certainty of any crime. Moreover, it seems to me utterly impossible that the creature you have described could ever assume the appearance of an innocent woman. Her character would be stamped ineffaceably in her face, and besides the strain would be something so immense, the talent required so enormous, that she would be sure

to break down at times, or perhaps overact her part altogether. No, no, Mr. Buchanan, when a woman becomes really bad,—to the shame of my sex I must say it,—she sinks in every way. A wicked woman, I think, is much worse than a wicked man."

Was not this exactly like a woman;—ever harder on her own sex than the other?

"But supposing that it were possible," I went on; "I myself think it is, and I expect that I have had more experience of the deceitfulness of the world than you can possibly have had. Supposing that it did actually happen, what should you say of the man?"

"If I could imagine your idea possible," she answered gravely looking me straight in the face, "I should say that the man was quite right and that she richly deserved it."

I had not frightened her in the least, that was evident; nor did she seem to take my hypothesis in either of the ways I had expected.

Still it might only be a superb piece of acting.

And yet her indignation seemed real enough.

I determined to press her closer.

"But think of the temptation," I persisted: "she may really love the man. She may have repented sincerely; and yet she must know that no man would care to marry a woman who had been guilty of crime, however much he fancied he loved her. Would it not seem natural and venial to her to conceal her guilt in the hope of effectually hiding it for ever from her lover's ears, and to atone for her previous faults by a life of sincere repentance and love?"

There was no responsive light in her eyes as I had expected.

"I can't imagine the case you have put," she replied rising for the dressing-bell was ringing violently. "But if I could, I should say she deserved anything,—anything which might be the consequence. Nothing could be worse than such frightful deceit. It makes me shudder to think of it."

We both remained silent for a few minutes. I was at a loss what to say. She was evidently meditating deeply.

"We had better be moving, hadn't we?" she hinted at last with a half smile seeing that I still remained seated. "Did you not hear the bell?"

"I was thinking of your words," I replied abstractedly; "I wonder why a woman who goes to the bad is always far worse than a man? It certainly is as a rule, but why? That has always puzzled me."

"I think I see a reason," she hesitated, colouring faintly; "but I am so afraid that you will think it a conceited idea."

I begged her to go on.

"I think," she continued timidly, the blush deepening on her soft rounded cheek, "that our nature is more delicate,—finer, as it were, than yours originally. Our ideas start from a higher level. Our minds are less practical, less willing to recognise the coarse commonplaces of everyday life, more prone to see unrealities, to aim at impossibilities. No doubt much of this is due chiefly to early training, to the care with which we are shut off from the facts of life in early youth, and to the

general atmosphere of unreality, if the expression is not too vague, in which girls are usually brought up. Even in America where we progress much faster as women than your English girls do, the harder facts of life are kept away from us studiously as long as it is possible to do so. The descent therefore to guilt involves a sudden fearful awakening from a delusive dream and a tremendous fall. A man's errors would be laughed at and condoned; nor is he considered any the worse for them, provided he steers clear of a certain line. The fall therefore in his case is usually a very gradual affair with no violent shocks to produce an awakening. A woman, however, is ruined at once by the slightest fault, and ruined almost irretrievably; for you know well that except under extraordinary circumstances no woman can ever recover the position she has lost by folly, whereas there is no such inseparable barrier in the path of a man."

"But after all," I objected, "this would only apply to women of the upper classes. How do you account for the degradation of women of the lower classes?"

"I don't know much about the subject," she replied, laughing; "but my idea is that a woman's character has less solidity, less of the nobler passions in it, and therefore when the better part is driven out of her there is a larger worse part left than in the case of a man. A man, for instance, very rarely delights in cruelty for mere cruelty's sake; whereas a great number of women do, and I have known several who positively enjoyed being cruel as a most agreeable form of amusement.

There is very little true generosity in a woman too. Her generosity as a rule is after all only a veiled form of self-gratification."

"You are very hard on your own sex."

"I don't think I am. I know I am very presumptuous in talking on subjects of which I know so very little. But I do honestly believe that a woman's nature is as much inferior to a man's in one way as it is superior in another."

I felt very much inclined to tell her plainly that her philosophy was mainly inspired by a very feminine lack of charity; but I refrained. My object was to make her believe that I talked to her as a friend. Mean, you will say. But if my dream was no lying vision, was I not justified?

A singular conversation, this of ours. The idea evidently occurred to her as well and she spoke her thoughts aloud.

"Odd, isn't it, that we should be talking in this way and philosophizing so much on wickedness. I am sure that any one would think we had each committed some horrid murder. Do you feel guilty at all? Well, thank Heaven!" she added with sudden earnestness, "that will never be laid to my charge; for however strong the will might be within me for a moment, I am such a coward that I should certainly draw back at the last."

And so she ruthlessly shattered all hopes that I had formed with regard to her repentance and confession before marriage. It was quite clear that if my suspicions were correct she had studied her part with the greatest possible care and was resolved not to make the slightest error.

I determined to produce the handkerchief and try what effect that would have on her. As luck would have it she gave me the opportunity herself.

"What were we talking about first?" she inquired after a moment's abstraction. "But really we ought to go in or we shall be late."

"About your locket and the story connected with it," I replied, rising and walking by her side towards the house; "the murder, you know; and, by the bye, I intended originally to have asked you if you think that this handkerchief is yours. It has the same monogram embroidered on it as the one on the locket."

She took it with a very puzzled air and examined it all over.

"Where did you find this?" she asked at last.

"It was in my drawer this morning," I replied evasively; "but I don't know how it got there. Some stupidity of the servants, I expect."

"Well, that is the oddest thing that I have come across for some time," she said with the most unaffected air of surprise.

"Why, are not the initials the same?" I inquired comparing the two monograms with some slight feeling of hope. Yes, they were exactly alike; I had made no mistake. The question was,—what would she do?

"Oh yes, certainly, the handkerchief must be mine," replied Eva. "But what makes it so odd," she continued with an air of the most innocent perplexity, "is that it is my monogram *before I was married,* don't you see. It ought to be L. E. A.,

and it is L. E. N. You know, Mr. Buchanan, that I did not bring anything with me from home but the clothes I actually stood in. However, as you say, it certainly is the same monogram as the one on my locket, and so I suppose that oddly enough it must be the very one handkerchief which I brought with me from home and which I certainly thought had been re-marked with the other things. I suppose it must have been forgotten."

I was so utterly astonished at the calmness with which she acknowledged this handkerchief to be hers though it carried with it such a damning weight of incrimination, that I was dumbfounded for the moment. I had expected, I must admit, a consummate piece of acting, for I knew well the wonderful control she must have acquired over her face and voice in order to play her *rôle* of innocence so perfectly. But I had certainly expected as well that for the moment she would have been taken by surprise and perhaps let fall if only for a second her skilfully constructed mask.

But no, not at all!

There was not the slightest appearance of embarrassment, not the smallest change of colour, not the faintest quiver in the voice perceptible.

The supposed coincidence was certainly sufficiently odd to have surprised any woman; and all that I could say was that she was just surprised enough to be natural without being embarrassed in the least.

On the contrary she discussed the identity of the handkerchief with as much ease and confidence

as if it had been the most ordinary piece of cambric and she had transferred it to her pocket with the most business-like air of ownership.

My trap so carefully laid for her capture had really effected nothing. I knew no more for certain than I had done at the beginning. The only thing I could say was that the monogram on the handkerchief was the same as that on the locket and that she had acknowledged both to be hers. But that of course I knew well she would do, nor was there any way out of it without exciting suspicion.

The question however which racked my brain was,—had she recognised the handkerchief, or did she really believe in the coincidence she had suggested?

My invention was now entirely at a standstill. I had not the remotest idea what to say next, and so I very wisely said nothing for fear of showing my hand to this sharp-witted woman. I determined to wait till I was alone and could think over the results of the day.

Perhaps she was exhausted too with her efforts and was glad of the rest. Anyhow she said nothing more and we walked in silence to the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOPES AND FEARS.

In the evening I enticed Nellie into the billiard-room while the rest of the party were engaged at cards. She really couldn't play at all well as yet, and it was with the greatest difficulty and chiefly by scoring her few strokes several times over when she wasn't looking that I contrived to keep her score anywhere within a respectable distance of my own. So you may imagine that it wasn't for pure love of the game that I liked a quiet little match alone with Nellie.

I knew now that I loved her, that I had always loved her. Had I known the true reason of her strange and unkind conduct on that fatal evening the course of my life during the last three years would have been so different. I knew now that my love for poor Mabel was inspired mainly by jealousy, founded on sincere friendship and admiration, magnified in after days by pity and horror. I knew that the sole hope of happiness for me on earth was the thought that I might yet win Nellie to be my bride.

But the shadow of the dead seemed to rise darkly between us. How could I tell her the truth? Would it not seem heartless cruel and unfeeling—more in my disfavour than the reverse? And yet if I told her my love, I must tell her all or the very suddenness of my passion would fill her mind with doubts of its constancy.

> "Birds quick to fledge and fly at call
> Are quick to fall."

No, if I told her aught I must tell all—that I had loved her from the first day that her childish beauty broke upon my sight and that it was only the mad desperation of baffled love which drove me from my fidelity.

I was full of strange hopes and fears. I almost thought at times from her manner that she cared for me, cared for my opinion of her, grieved that I should feel bitter towards her, perhaps even loved me just a very little; and then I seemed to see so clearly that it was all a grand mistake—she liked me, but as a friend, only a friend.

But I felt it would not be enough to be her friend; better that I should go away and never look upon her face again though that were worse than the bitterness of death itself. Yet friendship merely with her were all impossible.

Why should I despair? Her parents knew of no one that she had shown any special liking for. She herself had denied all interest in Wing. Perhaps—who could tell? Was it my own vanity solely which whispered that she had brightened strangely since my arrival, that the long-lost roses

were beginning to bloom once more on her cheeks, that the old merry laughter that I remembered so well was already heard waking silvery echoes in the hills? Did not her father say joyfully that she was fifty per cent. better than she had been all the summer? Had not her mother quietly remarked that I had done the child no end of good and that if I stayed on she might get quite well and strong again? Why should I despair? She had liked me more than well in the old childish days.

But there was the damning fact of my utter faithlessness which no explanation could palliate. What if she replied to me in quiet scorn of such fickle love? Involuntarily the bitter mockery of Swinburne's lines came flitting through my brain:

> "You loved me and you loved me not;
> A little, much, and overmuch.
> Will you forget, as I forget?
> Let all dead things lie dead; none such
> Are soft to touch."

I dreaded almost to put my fortune to the touch. I had staked my all on the chance—what if it turned up zero! I had half made up my mind to try my fate on the first opportunity, but now that it had come, now that I could speak without fear of officious ears and voices, my courage seemed to be altogether melting away.

Meanwhile Nellie was chalking her cue with the most elaborate care—I believe she took far more interest in chalking her cue than in any other part of the game.

"Eva has been telling me," she remarked demurely, "about your proceedings. Do you

know I strongly suspect that you must be violently in love with her? There now, isn't that splendidly played?" The latter portion of the remark referred to a very palpable fluke for six which I duly marked as a round dozen.

"Not at all," I replied carefully standing so as to render this manœuvre on my part invisible to her. "I am in love with some one very different."

"Really you know a mere boy like you oughtn't to be in love with any one. But you can't deceive me. Now I am going to be your father-confessor. Tell me why are you in love with Eva? She is a dear, I know and I like her immensely, but that's different. Now confess."

"But, little Miss Dogmatic, I deny the soft impeachment entirely," I replied raising my eyes from the cue to her piquant little face with the result that I missed my stroke entirely much to her heartless delight.

"I don't know what 'dogmatic' means," pouted Nellie from the other end of the table. "I believe it is a hit at Mumbo. I am not going to be laughed at or called names, there!"

"Well, I am very sorry, Nellie," I protested. "Don't bear malice; but why do you think I am in love with Eva?"

"Because you go and sit out with her in the arbour and talk philosophy;—at least I suppose it was philosophy though I thought it great rubbish myself."

"How do you know I sit out in the arbour with Mrs. Archer?"

"Why everybody knows it. Miss Luby saw

you go after her, and that is quite enough to make it common talk. Besides Eva told me what you had been talking about."

"Is talking rubbish a sign of being in love?"

"Of course it is; all proper lovers talk rubbish, —at least they do in novels."

"By your own showing, then," I said laughing but feeling very nervous, "you ought to be dreadfully in love yourself for you talk tremendous nonsense at times."

"None of your rudeness, sir. I don't do anything of the kind; I have been complimented today on my great sense."

"By whom?"

"Mr. Calphshed!"

"He is not much of a judge," I replied contemptuously; "he has not got enough of the article himself to know what it is like."

"That is very severe," replied Nellie reflectively. "Do you know, I think you must be jealous of him."

And then some painful flash of consciousness must have swept across the poor child's mind for she turned deadly white till I thought she would faint. But the rich blood surged back again far quicker than it had fled and suffused the poor little face with vivid crimson that seemed to deepen in intensity every second. She averted her tell-tale cheeks in terrible confusion and bent over the table to play, though it was not her turn; but I noticed that the little hands trembled so that she could hardly steady her cue for the stroke.

"And so every one knew of my *tête-à-tête* with

Mrs. Archer this afternoon?" I inquired calmly by way of giving her an opportunity of recovering her composure though my own heart was beating wildly.

"Yes," murmured Nellie in a half-inaudible whisper. I could not see her face, but the small ears were burning and it was evident she had not recovered her self-possession.

"And you think I am jealous because Mr. Calphshed is such a favourite of Mrs. Archer's?" I continued. Mr. Calphshed I may mention was a tall thin gawky boy of about nineteen, who was known to be violently in love with Nellie, though his passion had hitherto only taken the active form of staring at her with great sheepish eyes from a distance and manifesting the utmost discomposure if compelled to address her. I don't think it ever struck any one that his affection was reciprocated and I am sure it would have embarrassed him excessively had such been the case.

"Yes, yes," cried Nellie eagerly clutching at the straw I had so generously thrown her, "of course that is what I meant!"

This little fib emboldened me excessively. It was quite clear that she was most anxious to divert me on to any false scent even the loosest, and why, if not that the true one ran dangerously near home? The little fib was moreover so badly told and her cheeks assumed such a much deeper crimson than before while she was totally unable to meet my eye in the double confusion which she had brought on herself, that a great wave of joy surged over my heart nearly blinding me with the violence of its flood

and I felt that life might be thrown open to me once more, happiness might await me even yet.

I knew well that the haughty Eva would have scorned the very idea of that lanky, drawling boy. I question if she even knew of his existence. She reserved her talents for far higher game than that.

I edged gradually towards Nellie.

"It is your turn to play," she said turning suddenly upon me and drawing back a little.

"Ah, so it is!" I replied nervously. "But never mind about the game for the present. I want to tell you something, Nellie."

She looked at me inquiringly and then averting her head began to chalk her cue with tremulous fingers.

"Little Nellie, my dear little friend," I began somewhat inarticulately, for now that the supreme moment had come I felt hot and stupid and my voice was hoarse and uncertain. Altogether I must have been a ridiculous object though she did not seem to notice it. But I couldn't help it. It was life or death to me I knew. My whole future hung upon the lips of that slender, delicate girl and yet I was painfully conscious that to an impartial outsider there would have been little to choose between me and Mr. Calphshed at that moment. I think I could have got on better if she would have turned her face to me; but she wouldn't, she was deeply absorbed in chalking that cue.

And then as I paused for just a moment, the sound of merry voices was heard and the door opened suddenly. I had just time to spring to the other end of the table and recover my cue, while

Nellie rushed hastily to the opposite end and began spinning the markers round with reckless haste. They entered to find me aiming very unsteadily as though about to play, and Nellie with her back turned to the table marking.

"Ah, spoilt your stroke," said Tottenham cheerily as I struck the ball full and it bounded harmlessly off the red. "Never mind you can finish the game some other time."

"Yes," I replied trying not to scowl ferociously. "You did indeed." He had in fact, but not in the way he meant.

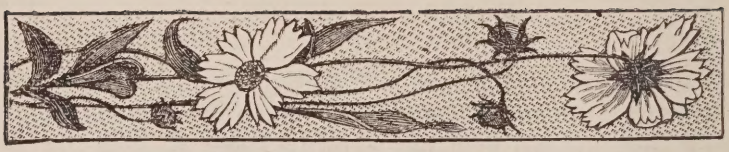
"Ah, never mind, there is plenty of time. I shouldn't think Nellie offered much resistance. Who was winning? Nellie, child, why what's the matter with your face? Who was winning?"

"It is so hot, papa, perfectly stifling," replied Nellie tremulously.

"Is it?" returned her father staring at her searchingly. "I don't find it so. Well, but who was winning?"

"The game had only just begun, papa; but I think Jack would have won in the end."

Was it strange, do you think, that I treasured these simple words as a good omen, and that I almost forgave Tottenham for having spoilt my stroke in that signal manner? There *was* plenty of time and I hoped I might win in the end.



CHAPTER XVIII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THINKING the subject over quietly, I came to the conclusion that my interview with Eva had not been so unproductive as I had thought at first.

It was quite evident that she had contemplated the possibility of shedding the blood of a fellow-creature under certain circumstances, and I had little doubt, in spite of the care with which so to speak she hedged on cowardice afterwards, that the questions she had put to me were not merely idle ones. The possibility of shedding blood under provocation must at the very least have dawned dangerously on her experience though I admitted that I was not justified in deducing more from her questions alone.

Then she had told me the history of her locket. Whether true or not Heaven only knew, but it involved an unreserved admission that the initials and monogram were hers before she married Archer, and that probably her clothes would have been marked with them at that date. She had moreover tacitly

acknowledged the latter fact, and had unhesitatingly accepted the handkerchief as her own. I may add that I preserved a drawing of the monogram.

This was really all the evidence against her, but it would tell dangerously unless an *alibi* could be proved.

Then on the other side might she not have acted under cruel provocation as she seemed to hint? Might she not have expiated her crime by a life of honest repentance and fervent devotion to her husband? Her words would undoubtedly bear the interpretation that she had repented, that she had confessed her sin, that she rested happy in the consciousness that it was condoned.

Obviously the first thing would be to send to New York and inquire into the truth of her story, to ascertain whether she was there in the summer of the year 18—. That would be almost conclusive one way or another.

And yet, why should I? Who made me a judge over her? Was I so blamelessly innocent that I could afford to cast stones at her? If I struck at her, I must indeed strike at Archer too; and why should I ruin the life of one who had shown himself my truest and most devoted friend? And all for a mere fancy perhaps; for I could not deny that my dream largely influenced my opinion, and that but for it I could have dismissed the whole as merely a singular coincidence.

But what good would it do to stir up the dark waters? She had no doubt repented of her sin. Her life had been blameless and loving since. She

had the air of innocence and purity. Why should I drive her to desperation? Why should I break her husband's heart?

I half determined to destroy the papers and end the question at once.

Stop!

And at the thought which darted through my brain like fire I felt my features stiffening with concentrated fury, my eyes glowing like red-hot coals, my hands involuntarily clenching tightly as if for a struggle for life with a hated enemy.

What if she had *not* repented?

What if this innocent exterior were but a cunning mask, this soft and gentle timidity but the perfection of acting, this loving devotion but the universal instinct which inspires even the hungry tigress with affection for her mate? What if this woman were in truth a human tigress endowed with extraordinary cunning cruelty and daring, whose path was marked by the blood of her victims, whose glance of hate carried with it a blight more fell than the glance of Medusa?

Who was the bold cruel-eyed woman I had seen in Town? Who was the tall haughty *incognita* who had killed the Homburg banker? Whose the face that I saw at the dead of night in the passage of the hotel just at the time when the murderess must have been returning from her bloody work? The answer was all the same.

And then a dozen half-forgotten details came trooping into my mind.

I remembered that the Archers' rooms looked out on the Strasse just opposite to the bank. Might

not this account for the extraordinary accuracy of the knowledge displayed with regard to the absence of the younger Reumont. Eva herself too had no doubt been in again and again to the bank with her husband to get money changed and would thoroughly know its internal geography. Moreover, her favourite colours were dark blue or dark green. Who so likely to pass unnoticed, specially because noticed and known by all, as the handsome quiet Mrs. Archer, whatever dress she might choose to wear. Of course!—I remembered now that the very idea had been suggested almost immediately by Gordon Leigh.

Then again, she knew the Hawthornes well, and there was undoubtedly rivalry between her and poor Mabel. Mabel had not disguised her dislike. Eva had disguised hers certainly from me, but that did not prove its non-existence,—nay was all of a piece with the huge mist of deception in which she lived. Eva must have coveted the diamonds. Eva must have seen us at the ball and guessed our engagement. Woman-like she had anticipated that I should take Mabel home and that we should linger at the gate. With fiendish cunning she must have dogged our steps homeward escaping her husband by some crafty device. Then she had satisfied her covetous greed by robbery her bitter hatred by murder. I must have seen her at the very moment when she was returning home with her hands red from the slaughter.

The picture was so horrible and terrible to me that I felt dizzy with loathing, and for a few minutes the room swam giddily round me.

To be in the same house with this demon, to talk to her familiarly as a friend, to discuss even the old days, and scenes of her crimes——I who was bound to vengeance swift and pitiless, and she hiding the grin of complacent successful villainy under a well-chosen expression of sympathy and interest. It was enough to drive one mad.

But now it was my turn.

A few more scenes of the drama just for a while, and then the blow should fall swift and sure on the head of the criminal; and I laughed out loud in wild exultant triumph at the thought.

But stay!

I had no evidence!

She might have committed a thousand secret crimes, and who was to prove it? Had not the acutest brains in Europe failed to trace her?

What was to be done?

Suppose that I told my story to the world, who would believe it? Mad, they would say, monomania produced by horror and blighted love. Mad as a March hare, poor fellow! Natural, of course, and much to be pitied, but dangerous and unpleasant in the extreme. That would be all for them. For me perhaps restraint in some private bastille of a mad-doctor.

I must be careful or I should defeat my own ends.

I racked my brains to recall any circumstance which would admit of investigation any further.

Ha! I have it now.

The footprints!

Of course. Fool that I was not to have remem-

bered them before! The footprints on the stairs and in the garden. I had casts of them in Town. There was my evidence to my hand. If Eva were the murderess her boots would correspond to the casts.

First then to get the casts and compare them. Secondly to trace out her whole life previous to her marriage. Thirdly to renew the investigations at Homburg with the view of finding out if there was any secret way of entering the hotel. Fourthly to bring the clerks of the murdered man over and confront them on the trial with Eva clothed in a black dress and veil. That was the programme of the campaign.

But stay. There must be no haste.

If my suspicions were correct, I had to deal with no ordinary criminal, but one of unusual talent and daring and moreover the most callous merciless cruelty. Were she to suspect that I were plotting against her safety, would my life be secure for an instant? Was it not probable that I had endangered it already by my rashness?

What should I do? Discretion dictated an immediate retreat. Honour demanded that I should stay. Heaven only knew what dangers I might draw down on my friends by any cowardice. Sharp-eyed as this woman had shown herself, would she not know how she could best avenge herself? and my heart whispered that she might indeed strike with terrible effect.

I must stay to lull her suspicions and protect my friends and my little love. I must dissemble my feelings and my hate. I must even assume a mask

of friendliness. I must wait till the favourable hour was at hand. And then, God do so and more to me also, if she escape the penalty of her crimes.

My great object now was to find an excuse for going suddenly to London—some excuse which would seem ordinary and natural to even a suspicious mind. You must understand that a day was all I wanted, just time enough to get the casts. I might of course have written up to Town and had them sent down to me, but an insane terror of this woman's power had fixed such a firm hold on my imagination that I hardly dared to commit any words to paper which could possibly betray me if they were to get into her hands; besides the casts might be accidentally broken in the journey, and then the very foundation stone of the edifice I hoped to rear would be lost to me at the outset.

The difficulty was that I had only just come from London, and Devonshire is not exactly the sort of place from which the most enthusiastic traveller would run up to London just for the day—the distance is too enormous. In short, visitors at Greylands generally came for a good time and then moved completely off in another direction. The idea of my going away so soon would, I knew, be productive of an outcry. Old Tottenham would want to know the why and the wherefore, would argue that I ought to stay in their interest if not my own, and would be sure to put my departure down to some quarrel with Nellie or the Archers. Then there was Nellie to be considered.

Supposing that she was not wholly indifferent to me, would she not think at once that I had trifled

with her feelings and run away to avoid the consequences of my acts? What hope would there be that I should ever regain her goodwill?

In short I recognised that there were many excellent reasons why I could not possibly depart yet awhile, though it was really of the utmost importance that I should begin my investigations as soon as possible.

Then chance helped me again.

I was walking along the shrubbery in the afternoon towards the arbour where I had found Eva on a previous occasion. The sun was at its height and the lawn-tennis ground was a brown ghastly desert forsaken by all human creatures. The shadiest part of the whole grounds was that arbour, and thither I strolled slowly in the cool shadows of the shrubbery brooding over my half-formed plans for the future and wondering what would be the next move in the deadly game.

It was a pretty spot. Thickly embowered in huge clusters of clematis and jessamine and securely arched overhead by the enormous branches of a couple of giant oaks, it was utterly impossible for the most determined rays of the sun to pierce through the leafy roof. So it was always cool inside, even on the hottest Devonshire afternoon when the pampas grass on the lawn was drooping and dying with the parching drought, the ferns in the rock-work were brown and withered, and the very moss which carpeted the stones was dry and tindery with consuming thirst.

I heard voices proceeding from it and as I drew nearer I heard my own name,

There they were reclining lazily on the bench, enjoying the cool delicious breeze which floated dreamily in through the trees—Nellie Eva and Archer.

Archer called to me gaily, and then made some remark which I did not catch but which made Eva giggle hysterically while Nellie flushed crimson and declared that it was a shame.

"Come in, Jack," said Archer as I hesitated on the threshold. "Come in, old chap, and you can sit down too if you like; there is no extra charge."

Where was the brilliant repartee which I ought to have fired at him at once? It came in the form of a feeble smile. I didn't feel brilliant at all. The combination of love and fear and the presence of the objects of both were quite enough to damp all the brilliance out of me.

I remarked still smiling feebly that it was very hot, whereat Eva giggled again and then suddenly gave vent to a suppressed shriek.

"You wicked little girl," she cried piteously rubbing a severely pinched arm. "I shall be black and blue for months after that."

Whereupon Nellie without manifesting any repentance buried her face in Eva's lap, and laughed with smothered glee.

"I call it too bad," continued the victim with an injured pout. "She pinches me in the calmest manner and then coolly uses my lap as a pillow trusting to my generosity not to return it. See the disadvantage of being good-natured."

"You sweet dear," murmured Nellie clasping her arms round Eva's waist.

The coolness of the woman astonished me. The marvellous ease with which she threw herself into the part and carried it out to the utmost perfection of detail was startling. I could no longer wonder at her success; I could only wonder that she was able to so completely disguise her true character. Revengeful and vindictive she must be almost to ferocity, and yet she was able to enter so thoroughly into her *rôle* of innocence that she even refrained from returning the pinch she had received and was able to stroke the golden head lying in her lap with an air of mild benevolence and affection that would certainly have impressed a casual observer with a strong belief in her good nature, even perhaps that it was taken advantage of.

But *I* was not deceived. I felt like one gazing into the Palace of Truth and I looked deep below the false presentment.

"It is very bad for you really, Eva," said Archer critically, "to be so much with that designing young woman. She flatters you so outrageously that I expect some day you will fall into the delusion that you are a very agreeable person."

"So she is," cried Nellie raising her head suddenly; "she is a dear and every one thinks so."

"No, that is certainly not true," returned Eva laughing. "I can answer for one. Miss Luby for instance I know hates me like poison."

"Yes," murmured Nellie, "she does. Horrid old thing that she is."

"I am sure she does," continued Eva, "at least she looks at me at times as if she would like to

eat me or murder me, and her politeness is too appalling."

Miss Luby, it may be as well to mention, was the clergyman's sister, a faded little old maid of about forty and odd years who was a very decided specimen of the Church militant very different from her kindly and benevolent brother.

"That is a bad sign. Punctilious politeness is almost as aggressive at times as rudeness itself; in fact it generally springs from suppressed rudeness. I expect she doesn't exactly adore you."

"I know why," grinned Archer.

"And I think I might guess," I suggested.

"Yes, any one could see why with half an eye," declared Nellie with great decision. "It is all about that wretched little Mr. Sheppard. You have hit her sentiments off to a T I know. I heard her talking about you, Eva, the other day and there wasn't much doubt about it."

"You wicked little girl!" exclaimed Eva. "Do you mean to say that you were eavesdropping?"

"Nothing of the kind!" responded Nellie stiffly drawing herself up with the utmost dignity. "I never do such things. It was the other day at the Vansittart's party. You were playing tennis; and of course every one came to look on as they always do. I was sitting about two yards from the Luby, who was discussing you in a very audible tone to a couple of fossils of her own stamp. I don't think she cared a bit who heard for she was speaking quite audibly; and so I heard. I don't call that eavesdropping, do you?"

"I am sure you would not do anything mean," I

said warmly in answer to her glance more than her words.

She rewarded me with the sweetest smile.

"And what do you think the nasty old cat had the impudence to say of you, Eva?" continued Nellie in the liveliest indignation. "'I don't like Mrs. Archer at all,' remarked this creature; 'she is a woman I could never trust or confide in. She is one of those quiet gentle-looking women who go about the world doing no end of mischief without any one suspecting them. I consider myself a good judge of character. I have never been deceived. I consider Mrs. Archer is deep—very deep.' What do you think of that, Eva? Do you consider her deep—very deep, Mr. Archer? I don't."

"Well, some little pitchers have very long ears," said Archer laughing.

"What a shame!" cried Eva piteously. "I am sure I am not a dangerous character. Do you think I am deep, Mr. Buchanan, now do you really?"

If I had told her truly what I thought, I should have denounced her as false and black at heart as hell itself, a beautiful fury made by Satan's craft in mockery of God. But that would have been ruin perhaps to all. So I hid my anger and hatred beneath the mask of friendship and dissembled my real feelings.

"And the richest part of the story," continued Nellie, "is that Miss Luby declared that she knew it for a fact that Eva was thirty-six at the very least and that it was only the excellence of her get-up which prevented it being seen."

"It strikes me," interposed Archer his face

clouding over, "that this Miss Luby had better not make any of these remarks in my presence or we shall quarrel seriously."

I was silent.

To tell the truth, I was revolving the question of Eva's age myself. If she were as young as Archer had assured me she was, it was almost impossible that she could be the guilty creature I thought her, for the figure I had seen on the downs was certainly that of a woman not a child. On the other hand from her appearance I should have said that she was at least thirty though at times her manner was childish in the extreme. As to her being painted, that I did not believe—it must be mere spite or at most a very lucky shot—for if she could paint so as to deceive me with all my experience of artificial charms, was it likely that Miss Luby would detect the unreality?

But then some women and especially dark women retain their beauty for a very long time, so that counted for nothing.

No, I could not tell in the least. She might be any age.

"Did she say anything more?" inquired Eva.

"Yes, she proceeded to criticise me next. She said I was naturally a quiet unaffected little thing but entirely spoilt by my unfortunate friendship with that designing woman—meaning you. I thought I should have choked with indignation."

"Like her impudence to say that she knew that you were over thirty, Eva," growled Archer. "I wonder what she meant?"

"Only jealousy!" replied Nellie. "Every one

here knows Eva's real age now so it must have been due to her spite about the shepherd."

A vague idea came into my mind that perhaps Miss Luby had not spoken out of mere spite. Perhaps she had seen Eva before. If my dream was no lying vision, it was extremely probable that such had been the case. Heaven only knew what guise she might have seen her in. I thought of the scene in the Park and felt uneasily that I too might well assert that Eva painted without being actually wrong even though she had discarded such adornments for the present.

At the same time I could not help thinking what a mean part I was playing in pretending to be friendly to this woman solely that I might mask the plans which I had laid for her destruction.

And yet it was the only course open to me. Heaven only knew what consequences might spring from false morality at such a crisis.

Fate had thrown the clue in my path. Was I to despise the warning I had so emphatically received?

The sound of boots crunching the gravel; and then Tottenham himself entered with a brown envelope in his hand.

"Here's a telegram for you, Buchanan. We have been hunting for you everywhere. Dear me, I had no idea it was so cool here. Hope it isn't bad news, Buchanan. The boy is waiting if you want to answer."

It was—or it ought to have been—bad news for it compelled me to leave as soon as possible, but it fell in so opportunely with my plans that I had some difficulty in assuming the necessary appearance

of sorrow. My eyes must have betrayed me, for when I professed my regrets and declared that I should be back again as soon as possible, I saw Tottenham look at me with a curious expression, and when I had finished, he said with a short laugh that very often these matters took longer than people anticipated. I suppose he thought that I was running away on purpose—in fact, behaving badly.

The telegram was from my stepmother to the effect that everything was going wrong and I must come up immediately.

I appealed to Eva and Nellie for sympathy. "After all," I said, "it may be nothing but fidgeting, or it may be that I am really wanted, and I should never forgive myself if any harm came of my not going."

"No, exactly," replied Eva, "but I must confess that I think it would have been more considerate to you if Lady Buchanan had been a little more explicit."

"She never is," I returned; "it wouldn't be natural. I should think there was something very wrong if the telegram were explicit, because it would be quite clear that it had been sent for her."

"Of course," said Tottenham his face clearing. "You must go. As you say it is a pity the telegram says so little, but then ladies' telegrams—you must excuse me, Mrs. Archer—generally err on the side of *cautiousness*, shall we call it. I know that when Minnie sends one, she usually words it so carefully for fear of the post office people understanding it, that no one can make head or tail of it."

"I beg to state," remarked Eva airily, "that that is not the case with American ladies."

"Bravo, Eva," said her husband, laughing loudly. "And you are quite right too."

Next morning at a very early hour I was whirling away.

I had caught Nellie just for a minute alone before I started.

"Don't let us say 'good-bye,' little Nellie," I said tremulously.

"What then?" she inquired.

"*Au revoir.*"

She was silent for a minute, and then:

"Yes, if you wish it, Jack."

"If *I* wish it. Shouldn't *you* care then if we never met again?"

She hesitated again.

"Yes," she replied, with quivering lips, "of course I should care. We have always been friends, haven't we?" And a wan faint smile came over her face.

"I should come back—as soon as—possible," I said jerkily and nervously, "if I thought—you cared."

"We should all be glad to see you," said Nellie drooping her head.

"Should *you*, Nellie?"

"You know we all should, Jack," she replied raising her eyes to mine for a minute and then dropping them at once.

"But *you*, Nellie?"

She hesitated.

"Yes, of course, do come back, Jack."

I should have taken her in my arms and told her all, but that the door opened at that moment and the servant announced that the carriage was waiting.

"I shall come back soon, Nellie," I whispered, "and I shall have much to tell you when I come. Think kindly of your old friend when he is away."

"Yes," she replied, smiling softly, "I will, and we will say '*au revoir*' not 'good-bye.'"

CHAPTER XIX.

FACE TO FACE.

THERE was nothing really the matter I found, as you probably guessed at once. There had been a family row of the usual type. My little stepmother's bills for bonnets, etc., had come in and had been pronounced outrageously extravagant. My father had blown up right and left, prophesied that he would end his life in the workhouse, declared that she had not a spark of love or feeling for him, threatened to put down the victoria, give up the house in Town, drag her off to the Highlands and bury her there for ever and ever on an allowance of two dresses *per annum*. She had entreated, scolded, cried, threatened to leave him, and finally rushed violently off to telegraph for me.

By the time I had arrived the storm had of course blown over, the bills had been paid, the references to the Highlands and two dresses apparently forgotten, and in short the one object of the little woman's life was to get hold of me before I saw him and warn me that I must explain my unex-

pected advent by anything rather than that telegram.

Under ordinary circumstances I should have been in a rage at being unnecessarily brought to Town in such a way, but it fell in so well with my plans that I never thought of scolding her, though I gathered that she had rather exceeded bounds on this occasion.

"But then," she pleaded, "you know, Jack, I am horridly good in Scotland. I am sure I wear the same gown for ever and ever and don't buy anything—in fact I couldn't if I wanted to. So it seems hard if I can't have some new frocks when we come to Town, now doesn't it?"

There was a certain amount of truth in this, and she certainly was very good to the Governor as a rule. Her one vice I should say was love of dress and after all it was a very venial one. I often thought that many young women with old husbands would have flirted and enjoyed themselves in other dangerous ways which she had never ventured on. It is true that she would have lost all control over him if she had, and that she generally had her own way in the long run under the existing system, even if there was a row at the beginning; but still I respected her immensely for not doing anything of that kind and easily forgave a good deal in consequence.

The Governor, I think, realized that he had behaved rather brutally, for when he did appear he produced a peace-offering in the shape of tickets for the theatre. He must have absolutely contemplated taking her himself originally, which I

know was a sacrifice of no small magnitude for he abhorred theatres almost as much as his wife liked them. Finding me at home however he insisted on my going in his place; and as I knew he would be only too glad to get off I fell in with the proposal.

And so "mama" and I went together—mama wrapped in a wonderful garment of ivory Genoa velvet trimmed with white fox, which I should say was probably one of the heaviest items among the "few frocks" referred to so airily, at least I concluded so, because after exhibiting its various beauties and its effect on her own beauty generally with the most eager greed of unlimited admiration, she assured me positively that it had cost really *nothing* and that she had picked it up for a *mere song* by her own wonderful cleverness. I should think myself that the maker's name was Worth and that he had charged on his usual princely scale.

However I must confess that I felt proud of my little mama, for wherever she got her surreptitious finery from she was the kind of woman who can bear a good deal of dress and in fact requires it.

We arrived at the Suzerain just in time for the commencement of the "Queen of Bokhara," a rattling *opera-bouffe* which was all the rage.

The house was crammed of course. A mass of rainbow-hued dresses and glancing jewels, the whole lighted by the brilliant glare of the electric light. On the stage the fifty pair of fine legs which were the prop and pride of the Suzerain were twinkling with bewildering activity to the opening bars of

the celebrated ballet with which the piece began. It was called "The Haunt of the White Bear," and really was a gem, to quote the critiques. There was a great deal of swansdown, an enormous amount of white tulle, fifty pair of pink tights and enough jewels real and false to stock a jeweller's shop—the whole being supposed to form a correct representation of the ordinary everyday costume of a numerous horde of polar bears who were apparently resident somewhere in or near the town of Bokhara.

We need not follow the fortunes of the persecuted but decidedly volatile queen who was as lovely as glycerine violet powder rouge eye-pencils belladonna red-gold dye and real diamonds, all laid on with equal profusion, can make a somewhat stout matron of over thirty with thick ankles and elephantine legs, especially when these charms are enhanced by a semi-barbaric dress cut very low and short and revealing a great deal more than it attempted to conceal. It was satisfactory to know that virtue represented by the aforesaid matron was eventually rewarded to the accompaniment of a sparkling waltz; but long before this desirable consummation was attained, I had discovered a source of much greater interest than the antics and slang of "that popular actress," Miss Fitzjames.

This was a woman in one of the stage-boxes. There was nothing very attractive about her. On the contrary there was much that was repellant. She was dressed in what looked like ruby plush extremely *décolleté,* which in itself made her a very conspicuous figure. She kept up however such a constant fire of chatter accompanied by loud peals

of laughter that every eye was upon her and audible expressions of disgust were flying round very freely. She carried a large black fan which she flirted open every now and then with a sharp crackling sound, while she bestowed very liberally taps and even hard knocks on her three cavaliers with it at intervals. Apparently however these marks of her favour only stimulated them to fresh exertions for her amusement, until at last she threw herself back in her chair and positively shrieked with merriment, dropping her great fan over the front of the box into the gangway where it fell with a loud crash. There were cries of "sh" and "order" from a number of scandalised people, and I have no doubt that the dowagers generally were bristling with indignation at the "outrageous conduct of that dreadful woman." The scene was in fact much more suited to a music-hall than the decorous precincts of the Suzerain.

Her companions apparently awakened her to the fact that she was creating a sensation, for she suddenly drew herself up and leaning over the front of the box surveyed the people in the stalls with a sneering stare that for cool defiant insolence was unequalled. It seemed to express an infinity of contempt for them and their opinions, a wild lawless spirit of reckless defiance with which a hunted outlaw of some frontier-land of civilization might perhaps regard the men and manners which he had thrown aside and outraged, but so unsuitable so utterly out of place almost ridiculous in the stage-box of a highly respectable London theatre as to provoke a suspicion of the woman's sanity. Then

she turned to her companions, and vented her displeasure in some biting witticism which made them laugh heartily.

Her conduct however perceptibly toned down, especially after her fan was restored to her—perhaps the rescuer was charged with words of warning. She allowed one of her admirers to gain possession of it and submitted to be fanned. Her conversation became less boisterous, and altogether she soon ceased to be attractive to the general audience, who turned their attention once more to the legitimate performance.

I had watched her at first with some amusement anticipating a scene, but my amusement soon became coloured with a warmer interest as it occurred to me suddenly that the face appeared familiar to me. I levelled my opera-glasses at her, as she surveyed the theatre with the sneering stare alluded to, and obtained an excellent view. Next minute the glasses nearly dropped from my hands and I sank back in my chair fairly gasping with astonishment.

It was Eva Archer's face that met my eyes—Eva Archer whom I imagined to be more than a hundred miles away.

I levelled the glasses again and looked long and steadily first at her full face and then at her profile as she turned round at last to her companions. Yes, there was no doubt of it. Incredible as it might seem, there was Eva Archer's face feature for feature in the stage-box on the left of the theatre.

I gave vent to a slight exclamation which made my stepmother look up hurriedly, rather scandalised.

She could not possibly have heard the exact expression, but she guessed pretty shrewdly I imagine.

I sank back in my chair again and turned the matter over. It could not possibly be Eva—that was more than even I could believe.

And if not, how came I to be deceived at first?

I looked at her again, and then I noticed something which I had passed over at first. It was Eva's face truly but not as I had seen it last. It was harder, crueler, more sensual. It was Eva's face if one could imagine it transfigured to that of a demon. It was the fierce cruel-eyed face that had leant over me in my dreams at Homburg, the face with the wolfish eyes that I had depicted so oft to myself bending over the sleeping figure of Mabel with the murderous weapon raised ready to strike.

Often had I pictured to myself the crime which had rendered night hideous with its foulness. Often had I imagined the scene which must have taken place in the dingy little room at the back of the bank at Homburg. And the face of the murderess was ever the same—the face of Eva Archer without her fair-seeming mask and with all the foul passions which possessed her visible in every feature.

And now I saw that very face in the flesh before me.

Is it strange that I changed from icy cold to heat like that of the tropics, that my heart beat more wildly, my blood coursed more swiftly in my veins, that I feared that I might faint through the violence of my excitement?

That I was on the verge of some great and terrible discovery I had no doubt.

Eva was at least a hundred miles away, yet here was her face confronting me within speaking distance almost, and yet not her face itself but a horrible caricature. What did that portend?

I scarcely dared put into words the thought that darted through my brain.

This woman must be Eva's *double,* like her in everything but gentleness. She it was whom I had seen in the Park. She had not bowed of course, because she did not know me; her insolent stare was but the exuberance of insolence. How horribly I had wronged Eva in my thoughts!

Yes, and more than horribly,—criminally.

For if this woman were Eva's double, if their faces were so much alike that it was possible to mistake one for the other, which of the two were the most likely to be the criminal I sought for, which of the two to be the face which haunted me in my dreams?

No one who saw them side by side would have hesitated an instant. Dress them exactly alike whether after Eva's quiet taste or the extravagant loudness over there, daub the one with white and red or scrub the other with soap and water, and though the resemblance would have been perfect yet there would have been no fear of error. No one could have mistaken the child of civilization and home-life for the daughter of Ishmael yonder whose hand was against all the human race and their hands against her.

I had harked away on a false scent up till now, but now the trail lay clear before me broad and red in the full glare of the sun,—I had only to follow it up to the end.

Suddenly my little mama attracted my attention with her fan.

"Do you see that woman in the stage-box on the left—the one who is behaving so shockingly,—don't you know her?"

"I don't think so," I replied anxious to see if mama had recognised her.

"Yes, I think you do. I have been looking at her for some time. I believe it is that Mrs. Archer."

"I thought you liked Mrs. Archer?"

"So I did," severely. "But she was as mild as milk when I saw her last. I had no idea that this was her style or I should have told you a very different story. I am sure I am very sorry for Mr. Archer—*he* was nice if you like. But she—why her dress is perfectly indecent; she has daubed herself all over with paint till she looks like a common actress; and as for her behaviour the only wonder is that they haven't turned her out of the theatre. No, I don't care for *that* sort of thing, and if I were to meet her again I should certainly look the other way,—there!"

"Are you sure it is her?" I suggested mildly.

"Yes, of course," with a decided toss of the head.

"But the last I saw of her was at Greylands, just before I started," I objected humbly. "She is staying there with her husband and was going to stay some time. It seems almost as though it couldn't be her."

"I am *sure* it is her!" obstinately.

"But it is almost impossible," I replied as submissively as possible.

"How you do argue,—just like your father. There, now, I will have another look just to convince you. Yes, I am sure it is her," continued the little person very decidedly and with great dignity "I *never* make a mistake about a face. It *is* her."

"There, they are going out," I said as the curtain fell for the *entr'acte*; "I shall go outside and see."

"How just like a man to be so obstinate,"—this very indignantly. "But mind, you're not to speak to her when you are with me. Of course you can do what you like alone, but I wouldn't be seen talking to a creature like that for *anything*."

I hurried out and met them coming along the corridor to the refreshment room, laughing loudly and apparently in the highest spirits.

The woman suddenly catching my glance fixed her great dark eyes on me with the same insolent stare that had astonished me in the Park, so that I was able to examine her closely without any compunction.

The resemblance was marvellous. It was Eva's face line for line and feature for feature, but with a mocking insolent sneer on the perfect lips, a reckless devil in the great flashing eyes, and a hard bold almost manlike look carved harshly and deeply over the whole face. It was too evident to me that it was not Eva, and yet a casual observer would have made no doubt that it was. And then the paint,—the red on her lips, the shade round her eyes, the warm colour on her cheeks, the pearly whiteness of her complexion which completed the strange resemblance or caricature were all due to art;—why should Eva disguise the very charms

with which Nature had so bountifully gifted her by this artificial accentuation which was so much the reverse of an enhancement? For it was no disguise were it intended as one. Only people who knew her well or who observed her very closely would have noticed the difference. Most people would have shrugged their shoulders and wondered why poor Mrs. Archer daubed herself in that hideous way. It was evident to me that it was no disguise even in intention. It was art misapplied to imitate Nature, to impart warm colouring to a faded and colourless face, to give her the beauty which she did not possess and without which her face would have been too harsh hard, almost masculine to be pleasing. Beauty did I say? yes:—

> "The sort of beauty that is called human
> In hell."

Fascinated by the extraordinary caricature I returned her stare till my eyes watered.

As the party passed me I heard the boy on whose arm she was leaning say,—he was a mere boy of nineteen, though the two other men were considerably older,—

"Do you know that masher, Queenie?"

"No," she replied in a deep voice that had an oddly familiar sound though very unlike Eva's melodious tones. "But he'll know me next time I reckon."

"Seemed rather struck," repeated the boy looking back suspiciously.

"I dare say. Most men are. You'll have to get

used to that. I don't care a——" The last words were swallowed up in the distance.

I followed them hastily to the refreshment room without any very clear ideas as to my course of action. Fortunately, however, I saw there a man I knew, who was supposed to be a great authority on all connected with that doubtful society which flits vaguely around the edge of the world,—Major Shortland was his name.

I directed his attention to the party and inquired who the woman was.

"The woman in red. Fine animal, isn't she?" replied the major. "Yes, that's Astarte so they call her here, or Miladi Louve as they call her in Paris. I don't know exactly who she is. I think she is English or American myself, but she talks French German and Italian with equal fluency. At the present moment I believe she has a house not far from Lord's that is fitted up like some oriental palace with every kind of costly finery. Last time I saw her in Paris her hotel and her extravagances were the talk of the place; she was the *bécarre de bécarre,* and she certainly did her best not to pall on the world by too much monotony of behaviour. I expect she is preying on mankind generally in her usual fashion; probably that unlucky boy whom she has in tow to-night is the latest addition to the noble army of martyrs. I can't tell you any more except this, which may be useful,—she has the reputation of being the most fascinating witch in London or Paris either, but a more reckless heartless cruel daredevil never walked the earth for man's undoing than our friend

Astarte. I believe she would think nothing of sticking a knife into a man if she got into a real rage. She has a nasty partiality for scenes too, and absolutely no respect for any one's feelings, probably thoroughly enjoys a good row now and then as an agreeable form of excitement. Ah, there's the bell. Ta, ta. Have you seen Archer lately?"

"By the bye," I said, stopping him, "doesn't it strike you that there is a sort of resemblance between Mrs. Archer and that creature over there?"

"Hem—well—er—yes—I see what you mean. There undoubtedly is. Very strong too in one sense. And yet how utterly unlike really. Look at the difference of expression. It is just as there might be a sort of resemblance between a battered old rake and his daughter—that's about all. I should consider it a libel on Mrs. Archer to say there was a resemblance at all."

CHAPTER XX.

"WHEN YOU'VE CAUGHT HER."

Reflection showed that it was not such plain sailing after all even now.

I might settle it decidedly in my own mind that this Astarte, "My Lady the Wolf," was the owner of that deadly triangular dagger which had left those blood-red traces at Homburg, nor did the suspicion seem inconsistent with what I had heard of her character. If the betting lay between her and Eva, I had little doubt which I should have plunged on. But then difficulties started up at once.

The whole fabric of evidence which I had accumulated against Eva with such damning incrimination melted away entirely when I attempted to transfer it to Astarte.

Astarte certainly had not rooms in the Victoria looking out on the Strasse. She had never been seen at Homburg at all; and yet if she had been there long enough to acquire the intimate knowledge of interiors displayed by the murderess, it was almost inconceivable that such a noticeable

woman could have escaped notice entirely. Moreover the murderess had evidently mixed in society or she would have known nothing of those fatal diamonds; and must have been actually present at the ball or her plans could scarcely have been laid with such consummate accuracy. Besides the motive for the murder of Mabel which seemed so obvious in Eva's case must resolve itself into mere murderous thirst for blood, and then the wonder was that she had stopped at two victims. Why not have slaughtered hecatombs? it would not have been difficult.

Then if Astarte's face was the face that leant over me in my dream at Homburg and which I had seen in the vision of the murder on the cliff, there was still Eva's locket to be accounted for. It seemed almost outside the bounds of probability that the extraordinary coincidence should be carried so far that the two women should have the same initials, the same monogram. Was it not more likely that My Lady the Wolf indulged in a gorgeous crest with her *nom de guerre* embroidered in full than in the simple initials L. E. N.?

In short, I was completely puzzled.

I felt that I was no nearer the conclusion than before—not so near in fact, for I knew absolutely nothing about Astarte except what I had heard from Shortland, and that was hardly enough to found an accusation of wholesale murder and robbery on.

At one moment I determined to return to Devonshire at once and pursue my original plan.

But then I feared that Astarte might escape me again, might envelop herself in the impenetrable coat

of darkness which she appeared to possess and disappear leaving me baffled again.

I strolled down to the club with the view of picking up information.

On the way a man greeted me—a man with a pale face the lower part of which was entirely concealed by a thick pointed black beard and moustache. His face and voice both seemed familiar in a sort of way in spite of his foreign appearance and essentially foreign hat, but at first I looked at him inquiringly.

Then it struck me that it was Gordon Leigh—Gordon Leigh changed almost beyond recognition by that Frenchified beard and grown much stouter, but still there were the same unmistakable eyes.

I greeted him with effusion and took him down to the club.

On the way he told me a long series of yarns. He appeared to have travelled everywhere. He had just come from Paris, and would be in London only a few days. Would I come abroad at the end of the week? He remembered meeting Mrs. Archer at Vienna. Couldn't agree with me at all in admiring her. He thought her style was far too florid, too much of the dairymaid for his taste. He inquired delicately after my health and state of mind; expressed himself so glad to hear that I was coming into the world again, and said that he thought it unmanly to give way to despair. In short he did me no end of good, cheered me up, made me feel brighter and more hopeful.

I really would have gone abroad with him but for the great question of the pursuit of the mur-

deress, and perhaps—Nellie. I told him so—at least I mean I told him the first part, for I didn't think it necessary to mention anything about Nellie —and I assured him that really he was such a bright and cheerful companion, that nothing but an affair of such importance would have kept me from coming with him.

He seemed very much vexed, quite cross, in fact —which of course was very complimentary—and urged me so persistently that I explained to him how matters stood, the exact difficulty I was in, and asked his advice.

"But I don't understand," he replied very indifferently. "You have concocted a string of evidence against one of these women who was actually in the place at the time. You yourself say that as far as you know not an atom of it applies to the other who was certainly not in the place, for I have seen Miladi Louve often in Paris and I am sure I shouldn't have mistaken her face for that of Mrs. Archer or in fact failed to recognise her if she had been there. Besides Miladi doesn't hide her light under a bushel, I can assure you. Well supposing she were there somehow and invisible, that is supposing the impossible;—you haven't a fragment of *legal* evidence against either woman it seems to me, nothing even of the vaguest circumstantial kind in the eye of the law, for you can't bring dreams into court you know. Doesn't it seem like a labour of Sisyphus to continue?"

"Yes, but I have," I cried eagerly. "You don't understand, or I didn't explain clearly. There are those footprints and the locket."

"The locket, I grant you, is something and might lead to more. Still that has nothing to do with Miladi. As for the footprints I don't quite understand."

"I mean this," I said decidedly, "that I have got a cast of those footprints which were found in the Hawthornes' garden on the morning after the murder, and I have got drawings of the marks on the stairs. Now do you understand?"

"No," he replied, catching me up irritably. "How can I unless you tell me all? I *don't* see."

"I want of course to compare them with the feet or rather boots of both these women. You must remember the marks were dainty enough, obviously made by a small female foot in a fashionable boot—in short, probably a boot very similar to the ones the owner would wear on ordinary occasions."

"Well, he replied, "but doesn't that rather upset the idea——"

"Well," I inquired, as he hesitated, "what idea?"

"Oh, nothing. I see I am mistaken," he replied with some confusion of manner.

"My plan," I continued, "is to make this Astarte's acquaintance in an ordinary way, and find out where she gets her boots. Then I shall make her shoemaker's acquaintance and order a pair of boots of him for her. Do you see?"

"No," he said blankly, "I don't."

"Then I shall compare the boots with my casts. If they don't fit, I shall return to Devonshire of course as soon as possible and examine Mrs. Archer's boots. I will stake my life that one of the

two fits, and I'll lay you what you like that if either of those two women is found to have a foot which corresponds to my casts, she will make the acquaintance of the inside of a prison within a week after the discovery—or a *maison de santé.*"

"Ah," he said slowly drawing a deep breath, "I never thought of that way. Do you really think any magistrate would grant a warrant of arrest on such scanty evidence?"

"Certainly I do."

He said nothing for a few minutes but remained lost in thought. Then he inquired very seriously:

"What was that you said about a *maison de santé?* I didn't quite understand the remark."

"I mean this. If the criminal is this wretch whom you call Louve, I will hunt her down to the gallows with no more compunction than I would shoot a she-wolf that had killed a dear friend of mine. But if it is Mrs. Archer, I will spare her for her husband's sake—I mean I will spare him the unutterable shame of such a tragedy, that is if he consents to her imprisonment in a French private madhouse where she will be harmless for the future."

"Madhouse!" he gasped.

"Yes, but she won't be treated as a mad woman you know, except that she will be imprisoned for life. What else can one do? Do you think that I will allow such a fury to be at large longer than I can help it? It would be mere connivance."

"But what if she is repentant?" he urged. "She may determine sincerely to amend if you spare her life."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. Repentant! of course she would say she was to save herself. Let her repent by all means, but I will take care that the repentance is not a snare. I should be haunted for ever by the pale face of her victim if I committed such a culpable folly."

"Of course," he said looking at me and smiling, "you are right;—you always are. And I was wrong. Of course you will not let her escape—*when you have caught her.*"

"Exactly," I replied laughing, and rather crestfallen. "When I have caught her. And suppose now instead of mocking at me, you give me a helping hand to catch her."

He turned towards me and laughed low in my face.

"*I* help you!" he cried in a tone of utter surprise. "Nay, but you are joking. I help you indeed!—that is too good," and he laughed again, a low strange musical laugh like that of a mocking siren.

"Yes, but I mean it," I insisted joining in the laugh though it was against myself, "I really mean it. You with your vast and cosmopolitan acquaintance must know some one who is acquainted with this Astarte, I am sure, and I want to be introduced. Well, there, can you manage that part of the business? Or better still, can you find out simply where her ladyship gets her dainty feet shod, and that will save a lot of trouble? Will you do it, Gordon, like a good fellow?"

"Don't you think you are a little rash?" he said fixing his great eyes on me searchingly. "How do you know that I am not a particular friend of

Astarte? How do you know, in short, that I shall not put her up to your little game?"

"No, of course not. I don't *know* anything. I don't *know* that you are not a most intimate friend of his Satanic majesty. I don't even know for certain that you are not Astarte herself in masquerade and that that fetching moustache isn't false. But if we continue to discuss merely the things that I don't know, you will either have to stay in Town longer than you intended or leave half of them unmentioned. Joking apart, will you do it?"

"Yes," he said smiling again with inexplicable meaning, "certainly, if you wish it."

"That's a good fellow, I knew you would."

"Nay, more, I will go and see the shoemaker if you like and get one of her shoes."

"But supposing he won't give it?"

"Oh, there is no fear of that," said Gordon Leigh laughing loudly as if highly amused. "We needn't suppose that; I mean I can easily tell him a yarn and make it worth his while."

"That will be awfully good of you, old chap; because you see if I was to appear prematurely she might take the alarm."

"Yes, I see; what a head you've got!"

"Well, I have thought over the whole thing so often that I seem to have everything by heart."

"Tell me," inquired Gordon Leigh, "have you any objection to showing me these casts? I feel rather curious about them, and besides I should have something to go upon, because if the woman's boots were regular beetle-crushers I should know at once that it was no go."

"Yes, but," I cried anxiously, "we will try them anyhow. Many boots look enormous off the foot when they are not so really. But you shall see the casts by all means. Let me see, are you engaged this evening?"

"No," he said reflectively, "at least nothing of importance."

"Then come home and dine with me. My people will be glad to see you and I can show you the casts in the evening."

"Your people?" he inquired, as if startled. "Are you married, then?"

"No," I replied; "I meant my father and stepmother. I am staying with them at present. I think you will like my stepmother. I had better tell you by the bye that she is considerably younger than my father. Well, will you come?"

"Delighted! charmed!" he protested with an exuberance that reminded me again that he was not English. His happiness in short was quite complete now. If there was one thing wanting before, it was his unfortunate non-acquaintance with my stepmother. I felt every minute that "mama" would be delighted with him if he would only cram her with as many compliments as he lavished on her shadow.

And so it was arranged that he was to come to dinner. Meanwhile he would go and look up an Italian marchese of his acquaintance, who he thought it extremely probable would be able to give him some information on the subject of Astarte.

I wired home to say I should bring a friend to

dinner; I also wired to Tottenham to say that I was unavoidably detained in Town for a few days:—would write. And then I settled myself in a quiet corner of the smoking-room of the club, and gave myself up to a cigar and blissful meditations in which a pair of blue eyes and a *retroussé* nose were very prominent.

CHAPTER XXI.

UNMASKED.

The evening was very successful. Gordon Leigh exerted himself to create a good impression, and my stepmother was delighted with him. I don't think that my father was quite so delighted, but, then undoubtedly Gordon devoted himself to the task of amusing the little woman with great zeal and apparent pleasure and he was decidedly a handsome fellow though in a thoroughly un-English way, and perhaps these two facts combined might partially account for his failure to engage the affections of the Governor.

After dinner he quite incidentally revealed the fact that he could play the piano, whereupon I know he went up several places in "mama's" estimation, for she was passionately devoted to music and even sang a little with a sweet, soft, but decidedly ill-trained voice. Naturally he played, and played extremely brilliantly. Yet I was conscious of a faint feeling of disappointment, a sense of something wanting in his execution. I think it was that I had expected such a much more decided

touch from such a decided character—one always does from a man—but there was really very little difference in that respect between his performance and the sounds evoked by mama's dainty little fingers.

For of course she played and sang too afterwards—he playing her accompaniments; and then he complimented her in a way that would have been fulsome in any one but a foreigner, and I think almost inspired her poor little brain with a belief that she was really a great musical *artiste*, who had only to be known to become the rage—about the very worst idea she could get into her head, for the foundation on which to support it was extremely limited.

Later on I took him up to my room and showed him the casts. He was in a very good humour and inclined to joke over them, especially when I pointed out how tiny they were and told him that they were smaller than my stepmother's feet, though she was a mere dot compared to the supposed murderess.

"A dainty little foot," he said laughing. "She may well be proud of it whoever she may be, mayn't she?"

"Yes," I replied bitterly; "especially if it brings her to the gallows. Dainty little feet like these should be reserved for better purposes than to wade in blood."

"Yes, of course," he replied dropping his light vein. "But still it is a pretty foot."

"Oh, it is pretty enough," I echoed indifferently; its prettiness only seemed to add to the horror.

If it had been a great coarse clumsy foot, it would have seemed more natural. And yet I don't know why.

We went downstairs to the smoking-room and talked for a long while. Several times I felt inclined to tell him about Nellie, but some irresistible feeling prevented me; could it have been an inspiration from above?

He went away about twelve.

"Don't forget," I remarked, as he bade me farewell before jumping into the hansom.

"No," he replied, smiling, "you will call for me at twelve. I expect you will find me at breakfast."

"Lazy dog! Good-night."

And the hansom rattled away.

Shortly afterwards I retired to sleep.

No, not to sleep, for I was extremely restless and utterly unable to sleep. After tossing and turning for about two hours, I got up in despair and partially dressed intending to go quietly downstairs and write to Tottenham; after that I hoped I might be able to go to sleep in reality.

My letter finished, I returned to my room again as quietly as I came.

Tired enough, and yet not feeling at all sleepy, I placed the candle on the dressing-table, and throwing myself just as I was half on the bed on my back, clasped my hands over my eyes. If you have ever lain in this attitude you will understand what I mean when I say that though my eyes were shut I could still see through the eyelids that there was a light in the room—I was sufficiently conscious

of its presence at least to be able to realize at once the difference if it were put out suddenly.

I was lying along the bed with my legs hanging over the side and my head not very far from the edge, in fact, it would have taken very little to have rolled me off on to the floor. I lay still and meditated.

It struck me suddenly that the last time that I had gone to bed in this way without undressing was the night at Homburg when I had seen the vision of the face.

I unclasped my hands and let them fall extended on the bed.

Then suddenly I became conscious of a strange sensation; the light went out; a dark shadow seemed to have come between me and it.

I opened my eyes in surprise and saw barely a foot from me the pale cruel face and glowing eyes of the midnight assassin.

My heart gave a great leap of wild terror and my blood seemed turned to ice. I lay paralysed glaring at that handsome wicked-looking face.

Then a veil fell between us and I was blinded by a thick cloth thrown over my face, gasping and choked by some pungent liquid chloroform evidently with which it was saturated. I was almost stifled by the powerful odour and in a few minutes should have been helplessly insensible.

Fear lent me the strength of a giant. Shaking off the lethargy which was creeping over me, I tore madly at the cloth with both hands, and hurling my body violently forward against my assailant, dashed the straining hands and the treacherous

cloth away. Dreading every moment to feel the sharp sting of that murderous triangular dagger, I seized the exposed throat of the midnight assassin in a grip of iron that would have choked away the life in a few minutes. But even in my deadly peril I noticed how smooth and soft it felt. Despite the manly appearance and dress of the enemy, it was too obvious that I had to deal with a woman.

With a strange feeling of shame I loosened my fierce clutch, and as she tottered unsteadily half-choked by the violence of my attack I transferred my hold to her arms, and twisting them behind her back, dragged her across the room and with the aid of a scarf pinioned them securely at the elbow. She was helpless now, and I felt much bolder, in fact no longer afraid of her.

In order to make sure, however, for I knew that I had to deal with a woman of unusual acuteness and daring, I removed a strap and padlock from my dressing-bag, and then, lifting her in my arms, placed her on the sofa at the foot of the bed, and passing the strap under her arms, padlocked it securely round the bedpost.

Then I examined her pockets—that is, the pockets of the light overcoat she had on. There was a loaded revolver in one and a long dagger-handled knife in the other. Drawing the latter from its sheath I recognised with a shudder the triangular blade whose deadly handiwork I knew so well. There was no doubt now of her identity; the woman I had sought so long was before me, at my mercy.

Why had she not used it on me? was the thought which occurred to me at once with puzzling persistency.

Did it not seem like true feminine perverseness that she should commit only unnecessary murders and omit the necessary one, that she should have cruelly murdered a helpless sleeping woman and spared me to her own undoing?

A deep sigh seemed to show that she was about to recover consciousness. I quietly transferred the weapons to my own pockets, and then damping a handkerchief with *eau de cologne* bathed her brow with almost a certain amount of solicitude. Thinking she might be oppressed by her high collar I unfastened her overcoat that I might loosen it, and then discovered, with a great deal of surprise, that she was dressed in evening clothes, white tie, swallow-tails, shirt-front, and all complete.

This seemed too utterly ridiculous.

Why should she have adopted this singular travesty?—it bordered rather on the burlesque stage.

What did she want? How did she get into the house? A dozen other unanswerable questions occurred to me as I bathed her white brow. Among others I marvelled what could have induced her to sacrifice all her splendid *chevelure,* for her hair was now cut quite short, and parted at the side like a man's? Who was she? How had she hidden herself at Homburg?

Astarte—for I suppose you have guessed her identity—suddenly opened her eyes, fixed them on me for an instant, and then shuddered violently and shrank away from me with a low moan.

She was extraordinarily like Eva Archer, though not so like as I had imagined before. Her face was pale and utterly destitute of colour, very different to the brilliant complexion of the other. Eva moreover was a *brunette;* this woman was much darker in every way. I should say, too, that there was quite five years difference in age, and Astarte was clearly not so massive in development as Eva. The latter's features too were essentially soft and feminine; her double's were cast in a sterner mould, and the short-cut hair gave her a very masculine appearance.

Indeed it was quite easy to imagine that she might make up extremely well as a man—though she looked anything but manly now in spite of her dress;—but I could never imagine any one being deceived for very long about Eva. I could also see that though when touched up with colour and seen in the glare of the gas-lamps or behind a veil, this Astarte might be easily mistaken for Eva, the differences were as strongly marked as the resemblances and especially there was a hard rakish look about the face before me, which not even her sullen shame and despair could entirely eclipse and which was so different to the gentle womanly face of Eva.

Degraded as she was, cold-blooded murderess as I knew her to be, without even any of the softer graces which might have invested her with a false fascination, still I pitied her then. I can't imagine why, except that she was a woman. I don't suppose I should have pitied a man, but I pitied her. It was no maudlin sentiment, simply a swift recogni-

tion of the horrors she must have suffered ere she could have descended thus to the depths.

"Well," she cried at last querulously with a piteous imploring hunted look in her eyes, "what are you going to do with me, now you have caught me?"

God in heaven! It was Gordon Leigh's voice.

I recoiled in loathing from her as if I had received a blow. Nothing but her sex could have stayed me from venting my fury on her, bound and helpless as she was.

Yes, I saw it all now!

Fools and blind that we had been!

Of course it was Gordon Leigh without the false beard and moustache, dressed exactly as I had seen him a few hours previously. What a flood of light it seemed to cast on everything! How many odd things half-forgotten poured in for confirmation!

His singular variation of moods from the almost womanly to the savagely ferocious; his slender figure; his eager inquiries whether I thought he would make up well as a woman; his difficulty with women as a rule; his strange fascination for men; his love of hearing his own voice; his constant allusions to the prettiness of the footprints; even his touch on the piano and the fussy pleasure which he took in constantly making cigarettes which were too small to be worth smoking—all flashed before me in an instant, just as they say the past record of his life flashes before the eyes of a drowning man.

"Wretch!" I cried at last, "I know you now, and I understand your vile deception. Snake in

the grass, then it was you who committed those terrible murders?"

"Yes," she replied doggedly with her eyes fixed on the ground.

"And why?" I cried breathless at her coolness.

"The one on the cliff," she answered simply, "was in self-defence. That man St. Casse would have killed me next minute. He told me so,—he had brought me up there to get rid of me quietly. Well, I saved my own life, that was all. Wouldn't you have done the same?"

This was a new light. Probably it was untrue, and yet it seemed to fit in with my own thoughts and what I knew of the character of the man.

"But how did you escape?"

"Ah, that is a long story," she answered wearily.

"It can't do you any harm to tell me," I urged.

"No," she answered reflectively, "and perhaps you may think better of me if I tell you. Besides, what does it matter now?

"The story that I told you at first," she continued, "was perfectly true in the general outline. I have no relations really. My mother died years ago, and my father—well, I think both you and I can guess pretty easily who he might have been."

She looked at me as if expecting me to say something. I spoke my thoughts impulsively,—

"Do you mean that you think that you are Mrs. Archer's sister?" The idea was so repugnant to me; and yet the conclusion seemed almost irresistible.

"Yes, I do," she replied bitterly. "Of course

she would scorn the very idea, as her father scorned and disowned my mother and me; but for all that I am her very double in appearance and I don't believe in mere coincidences. I know nothing for certain, but I think that she is my sister. Not that it matters much, especially now, but it may explain why I hate her and why I took pleasure in assuming her appearance at Homburg when I was going to carry out any of my crimes as you called them. The one thing that was untrue was that I had made money by striking oil; it was made in a very different way."

"Murder and robbery, I suppose?" I suggested with strong feelings of disgust.

"You are not far out. But you had best listen to me if you want to hear all."

She paused and then continued:

"My early life matters little to you, though perhaps it might explain the later parts. You may imagine that I lay on no bed of roses. My mother died when I was quite young and left me utterly alone in the world. I was then given the choice by the medium of a lawyer of leaving New York and going to Chicago as a bonnet maker's apprentice, or in fact of starving. I accepted the former offer naturally. What else could I do? Well, the life was a hell on earth, at least the other girls made it so for me, because I was what I was, nameless and friendless; and at last I sickened of it and ran away with a man named Hardy. He took me to San Francisco dressed as a man, and taught me to ride like a man, shoot, fence, and handle a bowie knife. I enjoyed the disguise immensely, and took no end

of pains to act up to my part; got a moustache and practised curling it among other things, taught myself to swagger and talk loud and tell long yarns, and all that sort of thing. I even sacrificed my hair and wore big boots to add to the effect. No one suspected me, and I was treated as a man the whole time we were in California. Then we moved on to New Orleans, and I appeared once more as a woman. Hardy made use of me as a decoy, and to such purpose that at last we had to clear out of the place; it got too hot for us. Then we went to New York—he disguised irrecognisably, I in my man's dress, and it was there that I first saw my sister, at least this woman Mrs. Archer. She happened to drop her pocket-handkerchief and I picked it up curious to know her name. I found to my astonishment that the handkerchief was marked with my own initials, or at least some of them. The monogram was L. E. N.; my name is Laura Norris. I kept the handkerchief without very much thought, more as a memento that I had a sister, and through a vague hope that some day I might revenge my mother's wrongs on her.

"Well, to cut it short, we went about to various places; sometimes I went as a man sometimes as a woman, but more often as the former because I liked it better and it seemed to come more natural to me. We usually got along by cards or billiards. Sometimes we organized robberies of various kinds, and he taught me most of the tricks in that line I know, though I improved on them afterwards. But I'll swear positively and solemnly that I never had a hand in shedding blood until he tried to

murder me. If he committed any murders when I was with him, I knew nothing of it.

"He got tired of me at last, I don't know why. Whether he thought I knew too much about him or whether he was after some other woman he didn't say, but he planned deliberately to murder me quietly. He brought me over to England to a small watering place down in Devonshire, dressed as a man. We passed as brothers under the name of Casson. We stayed only a few days and then gave notice to quit. Our luggage was to be sent to the station on ahead of us all except a bag which he kept. Then he took me out for a long walk in the country out to those downs. On the way he told me that he had brought my woman's dress wig, and all in the bag, and that I must change as it would be safer. I was surprised but suspected nothing, and so obeyed.

"Then we continued walking till we reached the place where you saw us. Then he ordered me to fill my pockets with stones. I inquired why, very much surprised. He told me with the utmost coolness that he intended to throw me over the cliffs into the sea and he didn't wish my body to be found. I laughed at first thinking it was a grim joke, but when he told me to make haste as he must catch the train, I saw that he meant it, and I begged and implored him to spare me. I raved and promised everything, but he only laughed at me and mocked me and told me my paltry life wasn't worth such a fuss. He even had the cruelty to tell me that he had made me change my dress so that if my body was found there should be no clue to connect

it with the young man named Casson. I became mad with fear. I was horribly afraid of death, and such a death too. I knew his great strength would overpower mine with the utmost ease, and he would have thrown me over like a child. Well, I saw he had incautiously approached the edge of the cliff, and I determined to make one effort to save my life. I rushed at him and struck and pushed him with all my strength, and the shriek which he gave as he staggered back and fell over sounded in my ears almost like heavenly music. Ah! you start and frown, but you would have done the same and felt the same. I know you can fight for your life too. I can feel your fingers at my throat now. And I had done nothing to this man except be his slave and plaything.

"Then looking round I saw you, and for the moment was paralysed with terror. But I felt very soon that I was quite safe. His body would tell no tales. You would declare the murder was done by a woman, and so I had only to reassume my male attire to be quite safe, especially as I should have a long start of you. I ran away as quickly as I could, and as soon as I thought I was out of sight, re-assumed my man's dress, walked and ran back as fast as I could, swaggered into the station smoking a cigarette, claimed the luggage, and started for London. There you have it. I don't think I was to blame. Why couldn't he let me live? I had done him no harm!"

"But I can't make out that the people of the hotel didn't recognise the man from the description in the papers and come forward."

"Ah, it was his over-cleverness. He wore a red beard there which he took off when I changed my clothes—I suppose, so that if any one met us afterwards or saw us, the description might be entirely different. Besides, he was Casson at the hotel, not St. Casse."

"Over-cleverness, indeed. I must say I think he richly deserved his fate,—the ruffian. What did you do then?"

"I set up for myself," she replied. "Sometimes I was Astarte, sometimes Gordon Leigh, change and change about, and it was great fun at first. I made money in different ways, most of them shady of course, but what else could I do? I couldn't have got honest work if I had tried, and I wasn't fit for it. It's hard, bitter hard, to starve when money is offered you, and to be earned so easily. Well then I went from bad to worse gradually. One time I was obliged to fight a duel at Monte Carlo and I came out victorious. I think that must have given me a taste for blood, for I went mad on duelling and especially with Americans. I hated them all, because my father and St. Casse were both Americans, and I——"

"Wait," I interposed. "There is one thing you have forgotten. How came Mrs. Archer's handkerchief on the downs?"

"I don't know for certain," she replied. "I can only guess. You remember the one I told you I picked up in New York. It must have fallen out of the pocket of my dress. Anyhow I never saw it again,—in fact, never thought of it any more until

you told me the story. At least I can give no other explanation."

"Why did you murder that poor old man?" I burst out, feeling that I could not listen to the whole story of her degradation and crimes.

"I was obliged to," she answered sullenly. "He asked my name and I told him "Mrs. Archer," and put up my veil. Now I had seen Mrs. Archer go down to the tennis-ground and she would easily have proved an *alibi* which might have been awkward."

"Did you manage it as we supposed?" I inquired repressing a strong expression of disgust at this cynical avowal.

"Yes, I saw the other Reumont go to the station —my room was next to the Archers, you know, looking out on the Strasse—and I knew Mrs. Archer was safe away. So I dressed myself to look exactly like her in dark navy-blue serge, high hat, thick black veil, and a chestnut wig over my own short hair, and walked across pulling down my veil as I entered. In the dark office it all looked black of course. Then——"

"Don't tell me about the murder," I cried hurriedly. "It is too horrible. What did you do when you came away?"

"I pulled up my veil, and unfastened my jacket to disclose a white waistcoat underneath. Do you see? The clerks swore of course that the woman was dressed in black. I was dressed in *blue*, with a white waistcoat and my veil up. You met me in the street and raised your hat unsuspectingly. That Oxford man, young Jordan, spoke to me as

Mrs. Archer when I went back to the hotel. Now do you understand why no one saw the woman in the street?"

"And you had the impudent cynicism to come and tell us——"

"Yes," she replied with a cynical laugh, "that amused me. Besides it averted suspicion and enabled me to tell the story my own way."

There was another point that I longed to ask her about, yet the subject was inexpressibly painful to me.

"And the other murder," I muttered at last hoarsely, "why—why——"

To my astonishment the blood rushed to her face and dyed her cheeks bright crimson.

"Yes, I did that too," she murmured hanging her head and dropping all her cynicism in the utter shame of the avowal as I thought at first.

"And why? How had that innocent life injured yours? And you who pretended to be so friendly with the family, you bloodthirsty wretch."

"Yes, I did that on purpose," she cried shrilly. "I always intended to take away those diamonds when I got the chance. I coveted them horribly. And I hated her, and I knew it would be agony to her to lose them."

"Hated her? Why, what had the poor thing done to you?"

"Nothing—she scorned me too utterly—and I hated her for it. But I wouldn't perhaps have killed her if——"

"Well?"

"If she hadn't been going to marry *you*."

"Wretch!" I cried furiously, "what do you mean by that hideous lie? What did it matter to you?"

"This," she replied looking me in the face for the first time, "that I loved you and hated her. I was determined that she shouldn't marry you. There! kill me if you like; I don't mind it from your hand—but it's true."

"Love!" I cried in scorn and loathing, "a pretty love yours—a love that sanctifies itself by murder. Do you hope to escape your doom by that paltry lie? Wretch, I could strike you dead as you lie there looking at me with your cruel treacherous face if you were not a woman."

"Yes," she replied bitterly, "and if I were not a woman and a fool, if it were only a paltry lie, where would you be now? One blow from my dagger as you lay there with your breast open, and there would have been an end of all your threats, all your fine detective work. Dead men tell no tales, my sportsman, and I never lose my head as vulgar criminals do, and leave things about for people to track me by. *You* know that it is hard work tracing me out even with the aid of dreams. Well I spared you anyhow; and you may thank God for what you call my paltry lie that I am here at your mercy, and you not lying dead at my feet. But I don't know that I am sorry," she said in a different tone. "I am hard and wicked enough, God knows; but there would have been little pleasure in life for me left if I had *your* blood on my hands, for I do love you, Jack, as much as I can, though you scorn and hate me."

She dropped her head on her breast as she concluded and lay in an attitude expressive of the most utter reckless despair that I ever imagined. She evidently considered that life was at end for her.

I can't analyse my feelings. Hate and loathing struggled with a strange kind of pity. I was determined to give her up to justice and yet I shrank from doing it. She certainly had spared my life whatever might be her reason.

"But how did you get into the hotel again?" I cried, curiosity overpowering every other feeling.

"I didn't attempt anything of the kind," she replied. "It was not possible. The face you saw was really Mrs. Archer or imagination. I had locked my door after disguising myself to prevent the *mädchen* coming in in the morning, and I walked up and down the Promenade for hours all night and slipped in early in the morning."

"Dangerous work."

"Yes, but remember I was dressed as Mrs. Archer. She would have had to explain. No one could have suspected Gordon Leigh who didn't get up till nine o'clock and then rang to order breakfast."

"Do you mean that you found time to disguise yourself after you saw me at the ball? It seems incredible."

"You didn't hurry, you know, going away or going home, and I daren't risk being seen about as Gordon Leigh. So I went back quick, dressed, slipped out again and caught you up. That's all. Of course I might have missed you, might have met you coming home. I don't know what I should

have done then, but you see I was right and everything worked exactly as I thought it would."

"One more question," I said, "and then I shall leave you to get what sleep you can. How did you get in here?"

"From the garden at the back through the smoking-room window. I opened it and left the shutter unfastened when you went out of the room to get matches. I wanted those casts."

She concealed nothing. I might have known that she was nigh to death when she cared no longer to shield herself.

"This bandage hurts me horribly," she continued very plaintively as I lingered still. "It is so tight. You might take it off. I can't possibly escape and you have disarmed me. Besides, I will promise not to move. You might take it off. You can't want to torture me, wretch though you think me and I am I suppose."

I hesitated for a moment and then I released her. She had spared my life; there could be no harm in doing this little thing for her.

"Thank you," she said gratefully, "that is kind, and I haven't done much to deserve it. And may I have some water, please; my throat is so dry and you hurt me horribly just now."

I poured out some water and brought it to her. There must have been some extraordinary fascination in this woman, for stained with blood as she was she twisted me round her finger with the greatest ease. I did exactly as she bade me. I don't think I fully realized the extent of her guilt —it was too black to realize all at once. Poor

miserable wretch, I pitied her, though Heaven knows I had little cause.

She just put her lips to it and gave it me again.

"Thanks," she whispered. "I am glad your last act is a kind one. Good-bye, Jack, dear old boy, and try to forgive me if you can."

"What do you mean?" I said uneasily, with a horrid thought rising in my mind.

"I have taken poison, that is all," she answered simply. "I shall be dead in two minutes. It is all up with me, and why should I live on? If you could kiss me before I die, I should die happier; but I don't suppose you will."

She put out her hand towards me, and I took it involuntarily. She leant forward with some difficulty and kissed mine, smiled up in my face so pitifully, and fell back—dead.

CONCLUSION.

Extract from the *Morning Post* :—

"Buchanan—Tottenham. October 12th, at St. Mary's, Stanton St. Mary, Devon, by the Venerable Archdeacon Buchanan, D.D., assisted by the Rev. Alfred Luby, M.A., Vicar of the parish, Douglas Patrick Buchanan, only son of Sir Douglas Buchanan, of Liviotdale, Perthshire, N.B., to Eleanore Mary (Nellie), daughter of John Tottenham, of Greylands, near Torcombe, Devonshire."

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"The bride and bridegroom then departed amid showers of rice and satin slippers. They will spend the first week of the honeymoon at Marthorpe, Yorkshire, the seat of Mr. Charles Archer."

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